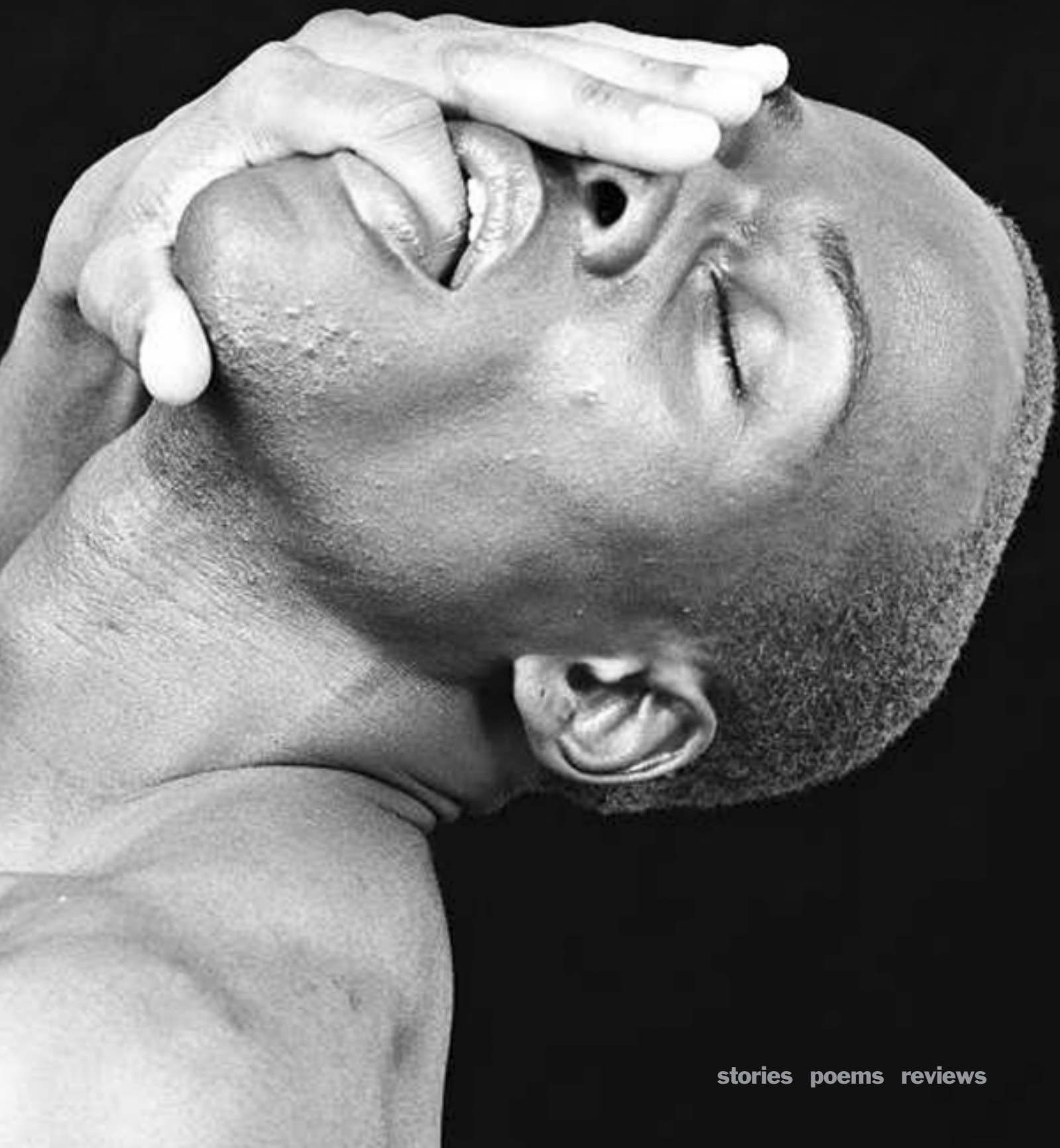


A QUEER LITERARY JOURNAL

Chroma

Issue 2 - Spring 2005



stories poems reviews

Chroma

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Issue 2 - Spring 2005

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02

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03

The Round Dozen

C.A.R. Hills

THERE IS a short story by Somerset Maugham, one of his best, called "The Round Dozen." It is about a professional bigamist who has married eleven wives, but who wishes to bring his tally up to the symmetrical number of twelve. He succeeds, and the conclusion of the story gives a bitter twist to the lips, which is also one of satisfaction.

I had an ambition like that once, although it brought me no worldly profit. But symmetry also pleases me, and I determined that I would be beaten twelve times, and no more. So far I am sticking to this resolve.

The twelfth was a birching, the only one, and it pleased me, too. There is a sensation after you have been birched, even during it, that is not exactly pain. A sweetness lies in the twigs. That happened in Brixton, the Streatham side. My bircher was able to give me details about the road he lived in and the adjoining one, that they had been named after a Victorian dignitary and his

he has not responded to later phone calls.

The happiness he gave me, however, was the same as the first time, when, after I was caned, I walked up onto Parliament Hill as night was falling. That was in 1986, and Rupert was a prostitute, a Young Conservative, with a large photograph of Margaret Thatcher in his bathroom and a copy of *The English Vice* on a decorative table. He wasn't very exciting. But it was intense happiness, alone on the hill.

The second time was the following evening, a grim, functional flat in Southampton Row, very modern, and quite small. My caner was a gross middle-aged American, a heterosexual. I went to him three times in the end, God knows why. He hit me very hard. That was his way. Although the effeminate Rupert had also been able to cause quite a pretty sting.

It was an accident that the first two were on successive evenings. After that the intervals were

There is a sensation after you have been birched, even during it, that is not exactly pain. A sweetness lies in the twigs. That happened in Brixton, the Streatham side.

daughter. So many pleasing details.

I loved his punishment room, too; it was so bare. There was a sofa to leave your clothes on, and beside that only the 'horse' over which one was tied, slightly raised above the level of the room, and at its far end.

This was a very cultured man, a university lecturer, dressed in army fatigues. He showed me photographs of the bottom of a man whom he had birched before, to give me an idea of what to expect, as well as specifications of the Isle of Man birch taken from the Internet. I've forgotten what these were, but expect they were impressive. And he himself was cold, cruel and almost attractive.

He had rung at six-thirty. I had just watched the news. There had been an item about the Stephen Lawrence case, and I had admired the cocky demeanour of the young murderers. I walked across the dripping park, leaving small memorials of my pee in various corners, in an effort to clear my bladder. All about me as I went were the groans and shouts from the pubs of England's World Cup game with Argentina. It was June 30th, 1998. When I returned, I learnt that England had lost on a penalty shoot-out. I was glad.

I had left him feeling very happy, though, and having convinced him that next time he needed to treat me with utmost brutality if he were really to please me. But the second time I fucked out, and

usually very long, years sometimes. I had been thinking about being beaten for ages. I was just over thirty then, and doing a job that was making me feel older every day I ascended the escalator at Warren Street. Once, after work, the gloomiest of wet evenings, I went into a sex shop on Tottenham Court Road, and in *Forum* saw the advertisement of the American.

I posted the letter from work the following day, using the office franking machine. That gave satisfaction. But then a month of silence. I got so impatient I answered Rupert's advertisement in a gay paper. He was able to cane me the same afternoon, for twenty pounds. And then the American rang the following evening, and was also able to see me immediately. But then began the years of intermittent experiences. For now I knew what this pain was, how meaningless.

It was only absolutely intolerable, though, once. It was the third time with the American, and cured me of this monster. By then he had moved to Earl's Court. He was a musician, and that time beat me over a music-stand. On the sofa were six rods of progressive severity. I was to take ten with each. I had asked for it, he said, and must steel myself.

I took it to the end of the third set, and then had to insist he stop. Thank heaven, in a way, that he had not tied me down. Because then I could

have been forced to take the latter three terrible sets. The fourth instrument would have been a very thin silver metal rod which was designed to begin cutting into me. God knows what the fifth and sixth were. I cannot picture them now, although I saw them all briefly, nicely positioned on the sofa.

And of course many fantasies since then have been of taking the latter three, of being tied down, of the number being increased to fifteen because one had begged for mercy, of pain unimaginable, pain unfathomable.

There is something radically incongruous about me. I buy the most esoteric CDs, obscure art songs of the nineteenth century, and then go to sit in the café of the Vauxhall Sainsbury's, where people from the surrounding council flats sometimes have their dinners. With the art songs safely in the bag, I eat some plaice and chips with plenty of ketchup.

I am kinder than others and more heartless. I am utterly self-absorbed, yet go out to others again and again, where many would not. The hate is from my father, the love - my mother. Yet she was culpable too. I remember her with as little affection as I do him. Yet the love survives.

So, what were the other experiences? A lot of the people were public school freaks, of course. They annoyed me by asking me again and again whether I wanted them to wear a mortarboard. Never mind the fucking mortarboard. All that matters is whether *you* want to wear a mortarboard. Just as *you* decide whether I get slapped in the face or kicked up the arse. But could they understand that? "There would have to be a limit somewhere. It's really the passive partner who's in control." And then they imagine they're going to turn you on.

One quite good fantasy, though, if absolutely hideous as a person, was the businessman from Victoria who came to beat me in his lunchtime. He had been a prefect at a public school (very minor, I should imagine), and had a way of saying "touch your toes" which was particularly interesting. He also used a gym shoe, very authentic, if quite painful. I've wanked about him and his gym shoe again and again, but couldn't bear to satisfy his desire for sex in the flesh.

There was also an unpleasantly fat prep-school master with a dreadful voice who was chiefly remarkable for how hard he could hit. And there was the eleventh occasion, at a gay SM club, where the public and artificial nature of the occasion destroyed all excitement. Oh, my God, what a washout it all was, these experiences.

Because they were ugly and I didn't like them. There was only one of these men for whom I could have felt anything. He beat me three times, at my flat in Clapham, and the third time I ended up in bed with him. I think he was married, a heterosexual most of the time, well-built and handsome. He wouldn't take off his pants. They were red. He also left his belt behind. I followed him out into the street to give it to him. A pretty gesture. But he didn't come again, so that was the end of that.

And I've stopped the whole grim business. Be adult now, I tell myself. You're in full middle-age and not feeling too well. Give yourself a break. Perhaps if you can find a man who really loves you.

But I was wrong, there was one other of these men for whom I could have cared. He was an Old Etonian, or claimed to be, self-consciously upper-class, blond, developing a paunch. He beat me with a truncheon at his dark, well-appointed house in Camberwell. I wanted sex, but he had to go to a dinner party and drove me home. It was a winter night as we came out and I remember his gloved hand on the wheel and the steady thud of the windscreen wipers on the wet windows. How often it was like that, raining and windy, pain replaced by exhilaration, the different areas of London, the contact with what had been one's youth. This has always been with me, and will be with me till I die.

Just as when I was thirteen, and went alone with my father to Scotland, in a vain search for the mother who had rejected him in his own youth, and the car was making some strange rhythmical beating noise, and I fantasised that those were the strokes of the cane coming down on me. Poor monstrous father, I pity you. Your aunt in Restalrig told us your mother lived in Acton. We went there, to her lodgings. She would not open to you. And ever since I have fantasised that we saw her eye looking at us through the spy-hole. Just like my mother with her phantom pregnancy, her vomiting up of your baby. Three grim people, locked in their fantasies. None better than the other, or worse.

But on that same journey north I was reading *The Old Wives' Tale* by Arnold Bennett. It was the first adult novel I had read, and what a masterpiece it seemed. It was understanding, it was tolerance and irony. This is what I have that my poor parents do not. I can contemplate myself from the outside. And sometimes I am amused. ■

Quality Time

Christopher Nield

06

Brother, the butcher's hands!
Take them. Put them on.
I am defrosting. Here's the
Cleaver. Save me. Touch
Cripples the calm
Of skin. Succumb.
Groan, jerk his grin. Taste
My infancy, bootlicker!
Allow your tongue to be my ear.

Brother, let us kiss.
Your lips entice like loaves.
I want to stick and stick.
I want all stuff.
I want purr and growl.

Let us make a marriage
Of mucilage and eerie howl.
Share the onomatopoeic hour.
The archaeology of previous care -
Don't tell!

I want you. Here's another one...
And another the dark
Reveals, steals. The weary duvet
Gloats. What happens here,
Happens. Let us curl.
Eat me, gaper.

Soft one, soft. Your nakedness
Wounds. My eyes can't close.
Shame this fear. Let this feeling
Long wrack and show. Onward
Innocence, helpless fumbling!
I kiss the lines and the embarrassed toes.

The pain directs a rocking
Motion: serpent's
Graceful slow
Belly-slap-sliding blood
Habit of lovers
Held. Morning
Scrolls windows, walls.

Sounding the Hull

Lisa Matthews

I wanted a red hand, a pasting of sunset
over my becoming. There was a rain storm
and I felt the water heave beneath the boat.

If I had asked anything of you, I am sure
it would have been given. But this one thing,
it seems, is beyond you now, as it was back then.

I listened as the carpenter sounded the hull,
mindful of tiny imperfections in the grain:
a swollen tongue; a bitter sand-stained groove.

Homeward eyes said nothing new, as if all we
were was each other. I waited in a chair
in the corner. Come, tell me a tall tale.

Three Disco

Mary Lowe

1972

I am twelve and skinny, my hips jut out like those of an ailing cow. One time, I'm picking gristle from the Irish stew, when down comes a knife and fork. Bang, bang. Dad is giving me daggers. I feel sick whenever I look at you, he says, you better get some weight on fast. That night with pencils and ruler splayed over the kitchen table he makes a chart and sticks it on my bedroom door. "Eat like a horse," it says; Mother is told to crank up the chips. If you go above six stone, she says, you can go to the disco with your friends.

I am done up like the bees knees, looking the business at the Top Rank Suite Saturday morning slot for under 13s. We are curled and polished, lip-sticked and ready, a few of us riding into town on the bus, looking for a bit of Boy. I choose the boy most likely to say yes as he is runtiness *in extremis* and just about comes up to my shoulder.

My mate Julie goes over, says, "Will you dance with my friend?"

He's probably flicking dandruff from his shoulder or lost in a reverie over Abba, or maybe doing neither only looking like an executive in a boy's body, all four foot ten of him. So he looks over and my mate looks over and there's me, standing nonchalant under the mirrorball, five foot six in my corduroy suit. And he whispers into my mate's ear, he says something which makes her laugh, then goes serious. When she comes over with his reply, her cheeks are puffed up like hamsters and she says to me, "He says, 'Is it a boy or a girl?'"

And I turn sideways and disappear.

1988

Still as thin as a blade but I'm hard now. I have metal, leather, bone, nicotine. Levi's and studded choker. A good combination. And I'm pissed up and ready for the pull. So there's me and Waxy, my best mate, sharking the dance floor, antennae twitching. I'm giving the eye to a couple of girls who are admiring the rings in my ears and Waxy's giving me hell, wondering which one I'm gonna pick.

But.

I am so pissed up with a bottle of tequila in one pocket and a bag of grass in the other, I'm losing it a bit as there are three of my exes there in the same room and two of them are staring at me. One lunges the other and now they're snogging, just to spite me, like the couple of bitches they always were.

I'm on the dance floor studying the amazing way that I dance; I could have been a professional I am that bloody amazing. I'm admiring the way my boots are polished right up to the eyelets, it took me ages to do that, the whole of Blind Date,

in fact. Donna Summer is getting to that croonie part when she's about to have an orgasm. And I'm away with it. I'm gone, solid. My boots take me over, melt into the sticky floor and the lights are popping over my head. I feel myself falling. Bang. I see lights, lollipops, red, green and amber. The sound of shattered glass and Donna comes right there on the dance floor and I'm gonna be sick in a minute.

There is black and a soft noise of talking and a hand comes out of the dark. Some kind of hand with one two three four rings on it and my hand goes up, and up I come, standing at last and someone is holding me and I'm looking into the eyes of a stranger. Lights appear around the edges of her like an aura and I realise that she's huge; she's a Himalayan mountain range in her own right. And for the first time in my life I'm looking up and out at the same time.

She takes me to her house that night, driving like the wind in her VW Golf. She tells me to imagine I'm lying on a beach; it'll relax you, she says. Her name is Katya. I look a wreck but am not to worry she won't take advantage, which is a crying shame. We stumble along the hallway and she throws me on a bed so hard I think: "This has got to be a futon."

"The bathroom's thataway," she says and disappears.

I wake to the sound of wind chimes and the smell of incense and I think: "Christ, I've died." Then comes the smell of fried eggs and I realise I am in heaven but not a Christian one. She comes in, Katya, a woman with a suntan disappearing down a fluffy bathrobe. Strong legs, the kind I want to climb, a bathrobe that stretches from here to here and she's bringing me some Alka Seltza that fizzes in the water like sparklers and suddenly I'm as shy as hell.

"I'm really sorry about last night," I say.

She tosses her hair like Greta Garbo. It's light brown, curly and wild. I put her down at mid-thirties, with green eyes. Green. And what you'd call a generous mouth, showing me her teeth in one slow smile, a glimpse of tongue perched somewhere behind.

"Are you American?" I say.

"Not San Francisco?" I say.

"No. Not San Francisco. I made eggs. I thought... People say it's the best cure for a hangover."

I look down to see two yolks sitting pretty on a plate and I'm off. There's a shoal of mackerel in my stomach - "the bathroom's thataway" - chucking up last night's tequila. What a waste. I'm searching for toothpaste like a heat-seeking missile; I can't leave this bathroom without getting the taste out of

my mouth. People don't want to be spewed over on the first date. That's what my friend Waxy says.

Katya's in bed, the covers pulled up under her chin, and me, I'm by the door, hopping up and down like a dickhead, my jeans in front clutched like a life jacket, and there's that split second when there's still time to run. But I don't run, I sidle up to the bed, drop the jeans. And there's me, all bone and no tits. I feel like a piece of fold-up furniture that's been put together wrong. But she doesn't mind, she being Katya who lifts the duvet so's I can survey her queen-size, no-edge body. Is this what you want? She is massive. She sits up a little and gathers me in her arms; me, the forgotten deckchair that's been left out in the rain, and already I can feel the tears - shit, why does that always happen? - as I bury my head in her neck that smells of honey.

And then she's whispering stuff in my ear, how she'd like to do this and that and I'm thinking: "Christ, she doesn't even know me." I'm imagining myself on a summer beach, warm water lapping at my ears, my belly, my thighs. I am cast out to sea on

The usual fuck-ups are there. I avoid them like the plague. Waxy is in, dressed to kill in a new leather jacket. She sidles up to both of us and introduces us to some skinny bunny she met at the social worker's bun fight...

a float, loving it. I open my eyes and there she is.

"Is this what you want?" she says, her eyes so close to mine we are that close; hers are green, the black in them growing larger and larger. I see her lip tremble and I'm gone. I feel myself falling.

Weeks later, Waxy's on the other end of the phone, pouring poison through the speaker holes. What's with the disappearing act? Why haven't I phoned her? Where've I been when she's been getting shit from the new lass' ex-mother-in-law's budgie? She witters on about something that makes no sense at all to me but is life and death to her.

"I need to see you, babe," she says. "But more important, I need to cast my eyes over the new love interest, give her the Waxy seal of approval."

My heart sinks as I make arrangements for the following week. I gotta hand it to Waxy, she's persistent, I'll give her that. She's my best friend and I hate her.

1989

Saturday night at the lesbian cabaret. Me and Katya on the Pina Coladas. We've already had a row. She's nervous, going on about making a good impression in front of my friends, what is she to wear? She makes so much fuss it gets on my nerves. Dragging me round shops, trying on all this stuff and I think she looks great in everything. But she gets dead narky, me passing her the extra large and it not fitting.

"Too big?" I say, not that loudly.

"Too big?" she says. "It's too fucking small, okay?"

We arrive. So far, so good. The usual crowd is in, mates from way back. Hi, they say. I do the rounds, holding her hand - Katya, this is so-and-so - as she doesn't know many people. She just smiles, says witty things. Charmed to meet you. I've heard so much about you.

The usual fuck-ups are there. I avoid them like the plague. Waxy is in, dressed to kill in a new leather jacket. She sidles up to both of us and introduces us to some skinny bunny she met at the social worker's bun fight, someone whose legs go up to her neck, some looker with a personality of a plank. Waxy's talking to me about a gig she's been to.

"Great to see you, mate," she goes. "It's been too long."

She talks like John Wayne at the best of times, but I wasn't in the mood. She goes, Katya, I'm charmed, and whips Katya's hand up to her lips and kisses it. Poor Katya, she doesn't know what to do. She's going red or white or possibly

green. Waxy has that effect on people.

Then that song comes on. That one by Roberta Flack. The first time ever I saw your face. I love that one. So we're on the dancefloor. Me and Katya, just the two of us. And I'm sinking into her cotton heaven, Estée Lauder's Youth Dew up to my eyeballs. Then everyone's around us and I say: "This is our song." I played it so many times at her place, singing into a hairbrush. And I'm thinking, I've made it, I'm totally blissed out. Here I am in the arms of a gorgeous woman, a real grown-up. We're out at last and everyone can see.

But after the song, we break apart. I see the sweat running down the side of her face as she pauses to catch her breath. I see a few sly eyes giving me daggers. Waxy and her witches across the room in a poisoned knot. A few little whispers. Tentontessie, they say. Fatso. I whip round to whop them on the head but they're gone. Just the eyes remain, staring from the back of the room. Lardyarse. Porker. Beef.

10

Michele Martinoli
Handsgirls





11

Michele Martinoli
Emily

Summer 1924

Christopher Barnes

Bonnard cheerios down the snailshell path
Shaking the spots off a handkerchief - business in Paris
With his wife - leaving me, Claude,
Footboy and fiddle player to the chateau on the hill,
To dot the I and to cross the T on his security ,
Gatekeeper to this unimposing house.

The angle of vision from the trundle-bed
Is just as he depicted it, we have the door ,
Rushing to and fro, fitful sunshine buttercup,
Impressionable cut-and-come-again light,
The bang-on thuya tree duck-egg blue through pink,
Powdery, a fade of quick shadows
Changed by a single blast updraught,
And the garden, conscious as an animal,
Cringing its fleeces around twigs and railings.
Like the door the bedspread is a real k erfuffle
But the sexual touchpaper sizzles these tints.

For the seventh time I set the needle
To the gramophone - Trixie Smith's
'Choo Choo Blues' is a rich spiral,
we immerse ourselves in trumpet and words,
the pleasure-giving Yves and I, we have become
sharp-eyed lovers, drinking from Bonnard's cellar,
mournful for his return,
the day on which we part.

Three-Piece Suite

Bertie Marshall

AT THE end of 1975 I was fifteen years old. I lived with my mother and step-dad in their three-up-three-down Victorian terraced house at 8 Plaistow Grove, Sundridge Park, Bromley, Kent. Behind net curtains lurked a mantelpiece with brass ornaments, doorknockers and horseshoes, porcelain bells, mementos from seaside resorts around England. A brown draylon three-piece suite squatted the room like an oil slick. My black cat Dudie slept along the back of it, his astral body floated up, off him, like a negative print, hovered in the floral-scented air, then descended. My step-father, riddled with cancer, would kneel in front of the sofa as though it were Buddha, his balding head resting on a cushion, slipping into morphine dreams via a suppository.

In 1976 I named myself Berlin. Berlin from Bromley.

My small bedroom was at the back of the house overlooking the garden of patchy grass, a dying Victoria plum tree, a plastic fishpond I kept an eel in. The one I bought for 35p from the live fish section at Caterers where the fishmonger had offered to kill and jelly it. Lugging the creature back to Plaistow Grove in my red plastic bucket was a feat of skill and courage, the eel like aquatic spaghetti, trying to leap out. Walking up the Grove with my bucket full of live eel, coming towards me was a vision: an old-looking man in a pin-stripe suit, and the other a shining thing in light blue and primrose, and red glitter boots.

"Whatcha got there, mate?" the thin shimmering thing said.

"Umma eel!" I said.

"Whatcha gonna feed it on, then?" he asked. I shrugged.

"Well, you better find some slugs, snails, worms, things like that," he said.

Then the man in the suit said: "Come on, David, we've got to go!"

"Bye, mate!" he said.

David's second name was Bowie; he was still living at home with his Mum.

I'd decorated one wall of my room in a beige and brown latticework design by Habitat. I'd chosen this in 1974. Another wall was painted navy blue and splattered with large gold stick-on stars I'd stolen from Biba on Kensington High Street. A small wooden book case and a bentwood chair (*a-la* Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret*), a horrible white painted wooden chest of drawers on

which sat my crappy hi-fi system. My records an eclectic mix of the *Cabaret* soundtrack, Marilyn Monroe's *Greatest Hits*, Nico's *Desertshore*, Patti Smith's *Horses*, and Yoko Ono's *Approximately Infinite Universe*.

Ripped out from library books, a photo of Judy Garland's face from the late 60s, close up, looking a thousand years old. Glitter in her hair like dandruff. And one of Brett Smiley, the pretty blonde girl/boy discovery of Andrew Loog Oldham, his 1974 single "Va Va Va Voom" which sunk without trace, but the lyrics hit the nail on the head. "Hey you, with your hair all torn, va, va, va, voom." The singles poster of Brett, all long blond pageboy hair, sitting on a black bentwood chair in a black vest and tights with big black platform boots, white cotton gloves and red lips pouting a drooping cigarette, referencing Oldham's earlier discovery, Marianne Faithfull, who at this time would have been sitting on a wall in Soho, fixing smack. And other American blonde boys, butch queens with shaggy hair and hairless skin, like roast chickens.

Jean Cocteau smoking his opium pipe. I loved his hands, twisted, withered vines and

the way he wore his jacket. Buttons on his cuff, undone. And Little Nell from *Vogue*, wearing a taffeta toreador jacket and pants designed by Miss Mouse. I saw Little Nell at the 70s nightclub, Bangs, opposite Centrepont in London; she was dancing on a raised dance floor that looked like a boxing ring with a group of shirtless queens. She took her top off and, hands on hips, was wiggling about. One of the security men went to ask her to put her top back on. She did. He went away. She took it off again.

On a light wood book case, I had a small tin with a Players cigarette ad on it. Inside was my stash of drugs, a wrapper of amphetamine sulphate (I spent £6 of my £9 dole check on speed) a couple of blues, jaw-breaking diet pills and several sleeping pills I'd stolen from my Mother's bedside cabinet. The room hummed with stale make-up and drugs and cigarette smoke.

One of the things to do in the nullifying boredom of Bromley was to go to jumble sales or roam the charity shops along the High Street. In 1976, being still less than a decade since the 60s, you could find wonderful garb to wear. I bought a pair of knee-high black leatherette, lace up boots. Black 60s stirrup pants. White cotton shirt. Black tie, black V-neck sweater. Black tie with dark red splashes on it. This

became my look, a sort of theatrical fascist. And my shoes - always my best find - a pair of Cuban-heeled fake snakeskin ankle boots in brown, swiftly dyed to blue-black, as was my hair.

Besides clothes and drugs, books were my other obsession. I'd often come home from Bromley Public Library having stolen various tomes, a favourite at the time was William Burroughs' *Wild Boys*, which I read several times but didn't really understand, also Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal* and Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*. From Andy Warhol's *From A to B and Back Again*: "I'd prefer to remain a mystery. I never give my background away. And anyway I make it up every time I'm asked."

Bromley became Berlin in the 30s; I wanted to worship and fall in love with a sailor, and I eventually did. I was already thieving, and drugs were a playground, a holiday in the head from the horror of being an only child in the numbing isolation of the suburbs.

Bromley High Street in the late 70s was a hangover from the 50s and 60s, like an expanding village with only two narrow streets. It had a Little Theatre, a Tudor-fronted building stuck between Boots and Dolcis, a cheap shoe shop. Marianne Faithfull had played there once in *The Three Sisters*. And Cliff Richard in panto as Buttons to Lulu's Prince Charming and Clodagh Rogers' Good Queen.

I loved walking down the High Street on days when I felt full of confidence and adopted my star persona. I could saunter down the quaint pavements and everyone would turn and stare, I was projecting "look at me!" If I thought exactly that, then most people would. If I shuffled down the street, my face hidden behind my hair and scarf, staring at the ground, people wouldn't take a blind bit of notice.

I liked the tearoom inside Importers, a shop that sold imported coffees. I'd sit amongst the blue-rinse set of old ladies, some pretending that I didn't exist, others, I mused, were old actresses and smiled at this boy in make up. The tearoom was very haute bourgeois with waitresses in little black-and-white uniforms. What a grope at sophistication, at 15, sitting in a posh tearoom, drinking Earl Grey; perhaps it was in my genes somewhere. My Granddad had been a Captain in the Army in India in the 20s; he'd started off as a private and within seven years ascended through the ranks to Captain. My Granny was a Lady's maid who married my Grandfather and became a lady of leisure. My mother was born in Bangalore. They had chai-wallahs working for them. So I was part Grandson of a colonial and part South London trash.

On the top floor of the Army and Navy department store was the Skyline restaurant that overlooked the adjoining suburbs of Beckenham and Shortlands. A terrace above the treetops, I imagined I was in Los Angeles, meeting Liza for coffee. I'd sit and drink at least six cups of black coffee, as if the daily lines of speed weren't enough, and scribble very Burroughsesque rants in my notebook: "Stars crashing orchids shit out green jelly boy with blond hair and green eyes door through which he went they came spurted out gasp choking on twins in vomit."

It was at the Skyline that I first encountered Simone, a black girl with platinum-blond hair, wearing a plastic mac and smoking multi-coloured Russian cigarettes. Actually, I followed her down the High Street into the Skyline, and went to her table to ask for a light for my Kent Deluxe. She looked so original, all black and gold, a huge painted red smile that cracked her face as she delighted in telling me about her boyfriend's boyfriend. Simone and I had several things in common, our love of David Bowie being one of them, and dressing up another. Simone decided I should meet her boyfriend, Simon.

"He'll think you're very pretty," she said.

Simon was a small and square-shouldered Bowie clone; blond hair at the front and red at the back, he wore a 50's bum freezer jacket and baggy pants. I found him unnerving. He wouldn't look at you directly, only sideways, and every now and then lick his lips like a lizard, actually aping a mannerism Bowie did in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. He had this pervy interest in other people's neuroses and fuck-ups; he liked watching me turn into a nervous wreck, fall apart. He was Bromley Common's answer to Andy Warhol.

For some reason Simon and I decided to write to each other, even though he only lived a bus ride away. His pen name was "Compact," later changed to "Boy."

"Dear Compact, I'm feeling divinely decadent today, I spent the whole day deciding whether to paint my nails green or black, oh well, Berlin"

"Hi Berlin, I'd like to be a robot, I think each day is like a day of television, See ya, Compact"

I'd sit in my bedroom in front of an old scratched mirror, my box of tricks before me. Nico or Patti or New York Dolls - "Jet Boy" being a favourite - blaring way on my crappy stereo system, my mother calling up to "turn it down."

I'd start to get ready at least five hours before leaving the house. Take a bath, put Max Factor Ivory Pan-Stick on in thick strips across my face and neck and blend it in, then dust it down with

Leichner's translucent face powder, and violently bash my face with the powder using a theatrical pink puff, huge clouds of powder exploding off my cheekbones, dusting the excess off with a brush, then pencil in my plucked eyebrows and ring my eyes in black, to accentuate their darkness. They looked like two currants in very white dough. I'd add mascara, thick, without getting the little black bobbles on the ends, then the difficult bit: Biba's Rhubarb and Custard Blusher; Rhubarb along the cheeks and Custard high-lighting them, giving them a bruised look. My lips painted in either Mary Quant lip-gloss that resembled drool or, during one phase, purple-black lipstick.

Somewhere in the midst of all this conjuring, I'd pause for a line of sulphate, a rolled pound

note up my nostrils. And the result? Perfect porcelain narcotic Panda. My hair at this point would have been a blue-black wedge parted on the side and floppy fringe over one eye, a thatch of black cotton wool.

And then my entrance: Down the stairs and through the living room, past my parents watching TV. My step-father, boggle-eyed, would just stare to the inevitable bleating of my mother's, "What on earth do you look like?" Sometimes I would swish past them without saying a word, and other times I'd stop, look at myself in the mirror, arch my left eyebrow and pout, then ask for a fiver. ■

Illumination

Tamar Yosseloff

15

Gold leaf, cadmium, ochre, saffron indelible once set on vellum.
The monks ground azurite and lapis
for perfect blue, took care

to cleanse their hands of poison
that made words sacred.

We place our fingers against
each other's lips, a vow of silence,

sense the touch mark even after.
I am brimming with words

but none can hold that moment
when our faces, edged in gold

glinted in the water's mirror,
the invisible sun within us—

so I let them fly, lead white
against a white sky.

Kalahari

Eduardo Pitta

16

AT THE time the Kalahari wasn't on Afonso's list of priorities. It was just a desert. But there can be compelling reasons, even at eighteen, when the bug gets one. The trip was coming to an end and would soon be over. He left Durban with Saskia and Marta after lunch. They crossed Pietermaritzburg at nightfall - the show at the Austin hadn't been bad - and it was only later that they got the warning of a storm. They were rounded up in the middle of the Drakensberg - there was no way they could ignore the warning from the Natal police helicopter. "Go immediately to the nearest campsite." In this country with its apartheid, nothing was left to chance. Saskia reckoned they could avoid the mountain guard control, but the attempt was an immediate failure. Night fell quickly and, half an hour later in the Giant's Castle Motel, confusion reigned. It was becoming almost impossible to get everyone in; there were almost twice as many people as beds. So the manager went round the bungalows with one definitive criterion: couples would stay with their young children and the remainder were to be divided up according to sex. Young children were considered to be those under fifteen. Even so, there were going to be some who would have to sleep on camp beds and in the armchairs of the tiny lobby. Saskia and Marta went off to number 19, zone B. Much put out, Afonso was sent to number 7, zone C.

He found a tanned young man there with bright eyes and untidy hair who looked very much like a rugby player. "Rylands, Ralph Rylands." He gave his name and joked about there being only one bed. Afonso learned that Ralph was twenty, was studying anthropology at a college in Warwickshire and that, as part of his course, was on his way to Sekoma. His parents lived in Kelso, south of Durban, on a farm with its own private beach. He felt trapped when not in England and made pretexts for getting away. This time it was the Kalahari Hottentots. He was travelling east so that he wouldn't have to cross Lesotho. He had left home on Friday and had spent the weekend in the city. He hadn't been able to go to Edward's, as his family would have found out straight away, but with his sister's collusion he stayed at the Oyster Box. Durban was great fun as long as he didn't meet up with his vast number of cousins. It wasn't hard to give them the slip. "I spend the day at Vanilla Beach and at night I go to the Candy Room. I was there the night before last." Afonso cottoned on at once - it couldn't have been more

obvious. Vanilla Beach was in what they called the gay section, a broad stretch of sand tucked between the smart south zone, the exclusive run of the whites, and the north zone that was reserved for people of colour. And the Candy Room Club was a well-known disco, highly exclusive, whose name quite rightly suggested its type. It was all quite obvious. In fact, the night before last was Saturday and Afonso had been there, too. He went with his two girl friends, and how they sweated to get a Members Only card - after they had been to see *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. He did remember the film, but he certainly didn't recall that Boer face. Ralph noticed his disbelief, smiled and went on talking calmly. They were brought mineral water, cheese omelettes, watercress salad, cucumber sandwiches, paw-paw and hot cocoa. Afonso reckoned the eggs were over-done and left them. At eleven, the generator was turned off, and half way through his shower the hot water ran out. Shock, screams and a freezing shower. Ralph gleefully rubbed him down. "There, all done." They went to bed, it was a cold night and the heating wasn't working. Ralph talked about the desert, which Afonso began to imagine, rippling and hot. "You can come with me, then I'll take you home." The following day he'd made up his mind: He would go with Ralph to the Kalahari. At breakfast Saskia and Marta were angry but eventually resigned themselves to finishing their trip alone. As they were checking out, for no apparent reason, Saskia recalled the horrendous murder of Orton. "It's a month today." Indeed on the 9th of August at 25 Noel Road, London - he had bought the house for Joe - before taking twenty-two

As they were checking out, for no apparent reason, Saskia recalled the horrendous murder of Orton. "It's a month today."

Nembutal tablets, Kenneth Halliwell smashed in the head of his 34-year-old partner, nine times with a hammer. In spite of the viciousness of the attack, Halliwell, who was also a writer, achieved the feat of

dying first. Saskia wouldn't shut up. "We've got to go to Jo'burg to see the play." (The premiere of *Crimes of Passion* was in November at a theatre in Hillbrow.) He got angry, turned his back on them and went to wait for Ralph near the Land Rover.

The worst bit was the mountains. Afonso felt sick on the bends and with the number of ups and downs, his body felt the harsh suspension of the car. It took two days to get to the actual desert. But the desert was a disappointment. Afonso found it wanting; a savannah full of clearings was not his idea of a desert. Perhaps Sekoma would be better.

Ralph was well-informed, prepared for every eventuality, and drove for a straight ten hours (from five in the morning till three in the afternoon) and knew exactly where each lodge was. The food wasn't the worst thing - an indigestible purée of greens and peanuts, biltong, boiled cassava and barbecued corn on the cob, grapefruit - it was the mosquitoes. There were no mosquito nets and Afonso would invariably wake up covered in bites. "It'll soon go, want to see?" Ralph made tiny bites on his calves, his buttocks, his thighs, his neck. His teeth were strong, knew what they were doing. This was how each day started: bites and a shower. Then at breakfast he would have to swallow an anaemic porridge, boiled in unsalted water (he liked it cooked in milk, with butter and an egg yolk). At five the car would break through the dusty air. One day, when Africa was just a memory, Afonso would look at a picture of Calapez and everything would come back to him in a flash. At that moment he had other concerns. He hated the isolation, he didn't want to seem a wimp, but they still had hundreds of kilometres to go. He found a much-thumbed copy of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in the glove compartment with underlining and notes in pencil and green ink. It was Ralph's bible; Lawrence fascinated him enormously. "He always took the wrong route, and I'd like to do the same thing." Then the third day a woman appeared. She started as a tiny dot, cloudy on the horizon. They drove towards her, they saw her make a shy wave, they gave her a lift. She was black, still young, tall, slim, determined and with a turban of green sequins. She talked to them in pidgin, a mixture of Afrikaans, English and a few Portuguese words. "Vunderful, senhor." She had come on foot from the lower Limpopo, was looking for her son who had left as a teenager, attracted by the mirage of the Transvaal mines. Years of silence had made her take to the road. She travelled as far as Lobatse with them, and then was going on to Ledhakane where men were being taken on at the diamond mines, where she ought to be able to find her boy. She stayed silent, very upright on the back seat.

Ralph didn't like what he saw, he wanted to finish his course and forget Africa. He found the concept of apartheid unbearable, the introduction of the bantustans was a repulsive farce. "I was in Transkei last year, and it's even worse there than here." And he most certainly did not agree with his father. Old Rylands belonged to the right wing of the National Party, he had supported Verwoerd and was a personal friend of Vorster, whose campaign he'd financed in order to guarantee the immutability of Separate Development. In Warwickshire he

had faced hostility because of South African politics. "Some snob from Holland Park called me a Nazi, that son of a Nazi whore, but he was no match for this liberal's anger and had to swallow his words. He even swallowed this." He touched the full, hard crotch of his khaki trousers. He remembered everything as though it were yesterday, every detail, and realized it had been a clumsy pretext. Bill Hartley was a bully and had been at St Patrick's for some time, but he didn't come off best. Ralph stuck his head between his legs, and at once realized that the other guy's cock was hard, no doubt about that. He got up, pretended to push Ralph away and walked off shouting insults. He went back to find him after dinner round the back of the chapel, where the older boys went to smoke dope. They were alone, standing either side of a small stone wall, until the other boy approached and held out his joint. Ralph didn't like the sweet smell of hashish, but he accepted, took two or three puffs, and knew that this was just the beginning. They stayed silent for quite a while, each listening to the other breathing. Night fell, Bill Hartley walked round the wall and Ralph had to lean against it as he felt the other boy's demanding hands. He let him undo his buttons and put his lips round him, thinking of nothing else but the gentle mouth of the show-off who was well-known for persecuting the freshmen. "It was a blow job worthy of a Tory..." He laughed as he related it. And it didn't stop there. At dawn the following morning, with a great hard-on, Ralph went into the other boy's room where the student in the bed beside his was still asleep. He didn't waste any time with introductions. "I'm going to suck you off." It wasn't easy at first, there was some pretence of resistance and then Bill Hartley gave in, turning over, convinced. Ralph sucked at him hungrily, his mouth moist, not at all gentle. "He was hard. It might have been his first time, but he lay back and enjoyed it like a madman. Then the other guy woke up, looked at us, got up and started to wank." The conversation had turned them on, they had to pull the Land Rover up to a bare baobab tree that stood in a stony area. It was the first time they had fucked in the car; Afonso took off his trousers and sat on Ralph. When they got back on the road, a harsh light shone down on them.

From *The Light*, a Durban bookshop open round the clock, Afonso bought books that, for one reason or another, never made it to Lourenço Marques. John Rechy's *Numbers* was one of them. He had read it in one go and was astounded by the promiscuous world of male prostitution, the cruising in Los Angeles parks and tunnels, on beaches,

in urinals, garages and cinemas. Ralph didn't know the author's work and was amazed by the descriptions of the rent-boy scene in Griffith Park, the battle ground of the homosexual outsider. "It gives a sense of choreography, ritual and mystery to the sexual chase." Afonso recommended he read *City of Night*, an earlier, more exciting book. "It's a story about a desperate, compulsive guy." Ralph said he would look for the book, as he wanted to learn more about this writer who likened repressed homosexuals to Black people who straightened their hair and wanted to be white. He knew from his own experience that this was exactly the case, but had never read anything about it. At St Patrick's there were no Black pupils, a well-educated Pakistani was the only note of exoticism at the college, but when he went to London every other weekend he would go to the Foxy, a bar in Old Compton Street, where he came across enough people to see that deception is commonplace. Afonso knew respectable family men who went in search

of boys, the kind of people who'd never go to the Egípcio or gay parties, but would discreetly look round the terrace of the Scala and, less cautiously, on the balcony of the Polana. They chatted cheerfully about all this until Ralph remembered there was no lodge to go to that night and that the following day they'd be in Sekoma. They improvised a tent, where they swapped the protests of Baez and Dylan for *Promises, Promises*...What would the bushmen - who ate game, roots and honey - think of Dionne Warwick and Burt Bacharach? Sekoma was disappointing. Ralph bought antelope horns, heaven knows why, and sarongs for his sister. They stayed there a day in a sort of boarding house where hunters would turn up on the off-chance. Afonso hated the thought of the inevitable return home. Ralph remained in a good mood. They both knew the Kalahari had been an illusion, an illusion in the midst of the temporal. ■

Translated for Chroma by Alison Aiken

18

To a Son Growing Up

Robert Hamberger

I'll stand aside and bow my head
to let you pass. This is a wild voyage.
My fear might hold you back. Instead
I wish you well, unstrapping my luggage
from your shoulders, becoming my mother
packing sweets for school trips, with Don't forget
to phone. Travel light. Slip other
numbers in your pocket beside mine. Get
ready to unfold that map
drawn across your palm, written in your
fingerprints. My wary advice will drop
away like rain when you shake your hair.
You're leaving a bay where it's chill and
early. Your steps are the first on the sand.

Sonny

Eamon Somers

BEING FROM Dublin 8, sixteen year old Mark-Joseph had the choice of a dozen churches within a few minutes cycle of his home, which between them celebrated mass almost continuously from early Sunday morning till very late in the evening. He loved the promiscuity of consistent change, and until that summer had never attended any mass or church on two Sundays in a row. But by the end of June, there he was for the fourth time, leaving the house at eleven-fifteen to walk to St Teresa's Donore Avenue, to make a public commitment to the same end of pew seat, as if his days of roaming were over. The ten minute wait for his lover to arrive made easier by the distraction of defending the seat against people who thought he should move up, and indeed by the commencement of the mass.

Mark-Joseph was no stranger to fantasy. On the airiest of evidence he constructed whole lives for people, beginning usually with their home. In Sonny's case, a tiny over-crowded flat, a bedroom smelling of boy's feet, filled with bunks and partially-abandoned clothes, bicycle parts, and comics. And in the midst of this squalor, the herring-bone suit which was to become so familiar to Mark-Joseph, covered six days a week with cellophane and hanging on the back of the door, the cellophane removed by his mother on

dared to look at Sonny's face when he was sure he wasn't being watched.

At half-eleven mass, the back of St Teresa's is filled with men who stand throughout the ceremony with their hands joined in front of them and who slip out through the door before the last gospel. Other men station themselves along the centre aisle at the ends of the first few pews, even when there are plenty of seats closer to the altar. At crucial points in the celebration all the men join in by going down on one knee or by lowering their head. But something is always held back, allowing progress to be monitored regularly on wrist watches, or on the clock on the front of the organ loft.

Sonny is clean, icy-looking. The cut of the suit, his straight bearing, the short oiled hair, but most of all the sure way he has of standing during the mass: one hand in his pocket, and his right leg rocking gently back and forth at the knee. Contained, not impatient, but certainly not to be tampered with.

He's always late. And on the last Sunday in June, Mark-Joseph watches as the familiar herring bone legs push between the men standing guard along the aisle, to stand inches from his right shoulder, again. Mark-Joseph is wearing his best slacks, with a short-sleeved pullover and a clean open-necked shirt. His shoes are modern, laced, and rub-

Sonny is clean, icy-looking. The cut of the suit, his straight bearing, the short oiled hair, but most of all the sure way he has of standing during the mass: one hand in his pocket, and his right leg rocking gently back and forth at the knee.

Saturday nights to air while he was in the pub with his mates, drinking ten or fifteen pints of Smithwicks, then showing no sign of the session on Sunday except that he'd wait until after mass for his breakfast.

Sonny was a rough boy. Mark-Joseph would not have used those words himself, but by family agreement there were boys to whom he was never going to speak, and Sonny fell squarely into this category. It wasn't just that Mark Joseph's parents owned their own house and that Sonny's parents rented a Corporation flat, nor the different schools picked out for them, although Sonny had finished the only school available to him by then. It was more that Sonny would as soon slap Mark-Joseph as speak to him, and Mark-Joseph would sooner be called a snob than address him and risk a slapping. Even after they'd been lovers for weeks he only

ber-soled. Sonny's herring-bone Weaver-to-Wearer suit blends with his lemon shirt and knitted tie. It's his Sunday best and will remain so until Christmas when it'll become his everyday suit. His shoes are handmade Italian slip-ons with leather soles that announce his arrival.

It's difficult for Mark-Joseph to believe that Sonny could possibly be interested in him. He's a Charles Atlas weakling, only able to take care of himself by staying out of dangerous situations. Having to run away when he strays too close to people like Sonny. It isn't that he wants to be him, or even to be like him; all Mark-Joseph wants is to be less afraid. Why should whole swathes of the world slap him if he comes too near? But if Sonny is choosing to stand so close to him, then maybe there is some chance word will get round. Sonny says: "Lay off."

He becomes more sure of the bleachy smell in early July. Pungent but sweet. Familiar. But how could such a thing become part of the ceremony, like the sanctus bells or the incense at high mass? Wrapping itself round him, calming him even as it draws him out of the ceremony and demands its own attention. Strong enough to wash away the guilt he feels at not concentrating on the mass, and not preparing to receive communion. The edges bristling with exciting danger. And the timing, just before the communion, both appalling and perfect. That anyone would dare to do 'it' at mass and yet the knee, inches from his shoulder, is now still. Sonny's head bowed and his hands clasped in front of him. His closed eyes allowing Mark-Joseph to linger a second as he turns back from checking the clock. The thought of what might be happening, as shocking as any slap, making him sit shaking when he should be going up to receive. The way already clear where Sonny has moved to allow him out, but instead of going to communion, he turns towards the exit and walks out into the warm sunshine to try and regain whatever it is he has lost.

Leaving mass so early was daring, and allowed him to walk to the corner diagonally opposite the estate of flats where he imagined Sonny lived, and to linger for a while to watch the comings and goings, wondering if Sonny was still eating his breakfast, or already down in the pub for a few pints before Sunday lunch. Mark-Joseph walked on towards home, taking extra time to get there in a mixture of new bravery, and fear that his parents would know he'd been up to something.

It was a week of confusion and anticipation. His life on the verge of being engulfed into Sonny's world. Mark-Joseph set to disappear. His tentative plans for university and travel set to wait until he knew what Sonny needed. Hijacked. From now on it would be violence, cramped smelly corporation flats, and a suffocating family insisting him into their cloying intimacy. Maybe Sonny had no choice, and Mark-Joseph was to be his joy forever.

At twenty-five minutes past eleven the following Sunday he's in his aisle seat, smelling of after-shave, and feeling crisp in his newly-ironed shirt and slacks, fresh from the dry cleaners. But he must watch the altar, concentrate on the mass, and not allow himself to drift off listening for Sonny's arrival, the thought of which fills him with such cold excitement. He must shut him out, and listen to the word from the altar, force himself to become one with the congregation, in their coughings and mutterings and kneelings and sittings and stand-

ings. Eventually, he is briefly unaware of Sonny, until just before the communion when the dry sweet comfort enters his nostrils and fills him with calm satisfaction.

He is steady enough to go to communion, and returning to his seat lifts his head to peek at Sonny standing guard, his head bowed and his hands clasped together in front of him, and moving back to allow him past. Mark-Joseph kneels and tries to thank God for coming into his body. But all he can think of is how Sonny is feeling, and if he'll be back again next Sunday. And worst of all: "What is expected of me now?"

It's a relationship. For the rest of July and the first two Sundays in August it's regular and satisfying and exciting. Mark-Joseph arrives early to secure his chosen seat and settles back to listen for the slap of leather on the marble floor. As the mass begins, he reconfirms his promise to God that he will do his best to concentrate, especially when it's most necessary. But he also asserts his and Sonny's place in the congregation. Their status as lovers locked together as one person, fulfilling themselves in each other's love. Sometimes he manages to let the ceremony take him over briefly, but mostly it comes to be like lying in bed late, drifting in and out of sleep and dreams and a warm bed and a sunny bright day.

And then on the third Sunday of August Sonny is gone. The gap in the aisle closed up. Mark-Joseph turns to see if he's further along or in the porch or down the side aisle; all he sees are the usual faces and stooped creatures. He blames himself. He tries to reason that his lover might be ill, or has gone on holiday. It is August. But he keeps returning to the obvious: it is all his fault. He had wanted too much, had not responded properly, or been sufficiently aware of Sonny's needs to put them first.

Something about the walk to mass the previous Sunday had been the high point of Mark-Joseph's life. The sixteen years he'd spent lurking on the edges had ended. He was strong, alive. He and Sonny, opposites but perhaps not such opposites as he had supposed. He was needed. Sonny telling him that he never had to be afraid again. He could stand up straight and walk where he wanted, and only run to stop something getting away from him. *From* him. It sounded so important, life escaping. And it could have happened, but not now, now that he had Sonny.

Entering the church, he delays in the porch to read the pamphlets and posters, and to insinuate himself into the band of men finishing their ciga-

rettes and holding back their involvement until after the mass has started. But not too long. His seat could be taken, forcing him to be rude to get it back.

So he moves in and waits, his neck stiff and his shoulders back in readiness to give his all to Sonny. His head lifted towards the ceiling, an inviting smile on his face, as the herring-bone pushes in beside him. Holding the image of the two of them clasped face-to-face through the mass. Never slipping for an instant, kneeling or standing or sitting. Rolling between each of them and incorporating the poses he's seen in the cinema. His stretched neck, his shoulders down, his back arched to best advantage. During the consecration he even allows his right arm to straighten so it almost, perhaps actually, touches the cuff of Sonny's trousers. Mark-Joseph is taller, broader, and braver as he allows himself to feel the pleasure Sonny is experiencing, and holds himself rigid until the other's satisfaction is complete, and both right hands join their left. Each of them at peace.

Today he enters the church even more filled with the power of Sonny's love. There will have to be words spoken at the end of mass. It has gone on so long, and the pitch is now unbearable. Even if

Sonny doesn't try to speak to him, Mark-Joseph is ready to move their relationship into a new and even more dangerous, but ultimately more satisfying, phase. Of course it's terrifying. The first words will be stumbling - maybe just "Hi," or "Sonny?" - before letting him take over immediately.

And when his lover doesn't join him in the aisle, Mark-Joseph blames himself. It must be because of last Sunday. He spoilt it. Had broken the spell, changed it from being a secret spiritual pleasure into something vulgar. And now he's paying the price.

And yet before he leaves the church he convinces himself that he can change the ending. He'll attend half-eleven mass next Sunday and if Sonny isn't there he'll go to every mass the Sunday after that. And if that fails he'll start to hang about the entrance to the flats, and try the local pubs. Sonny will take him back, and in exchange Mark-Joseph will promise never to acknowledge what is happening or try to change it, control it, or influence it. Sonny can be the boss and Mark-Joseph will remain the innocent, the untouched. He'll pray for loss of awareness, for the return of innocence. He begins by asking God before he leaves the church. Sonny and Mark-Joseph are an item. Nothing can change that. ■

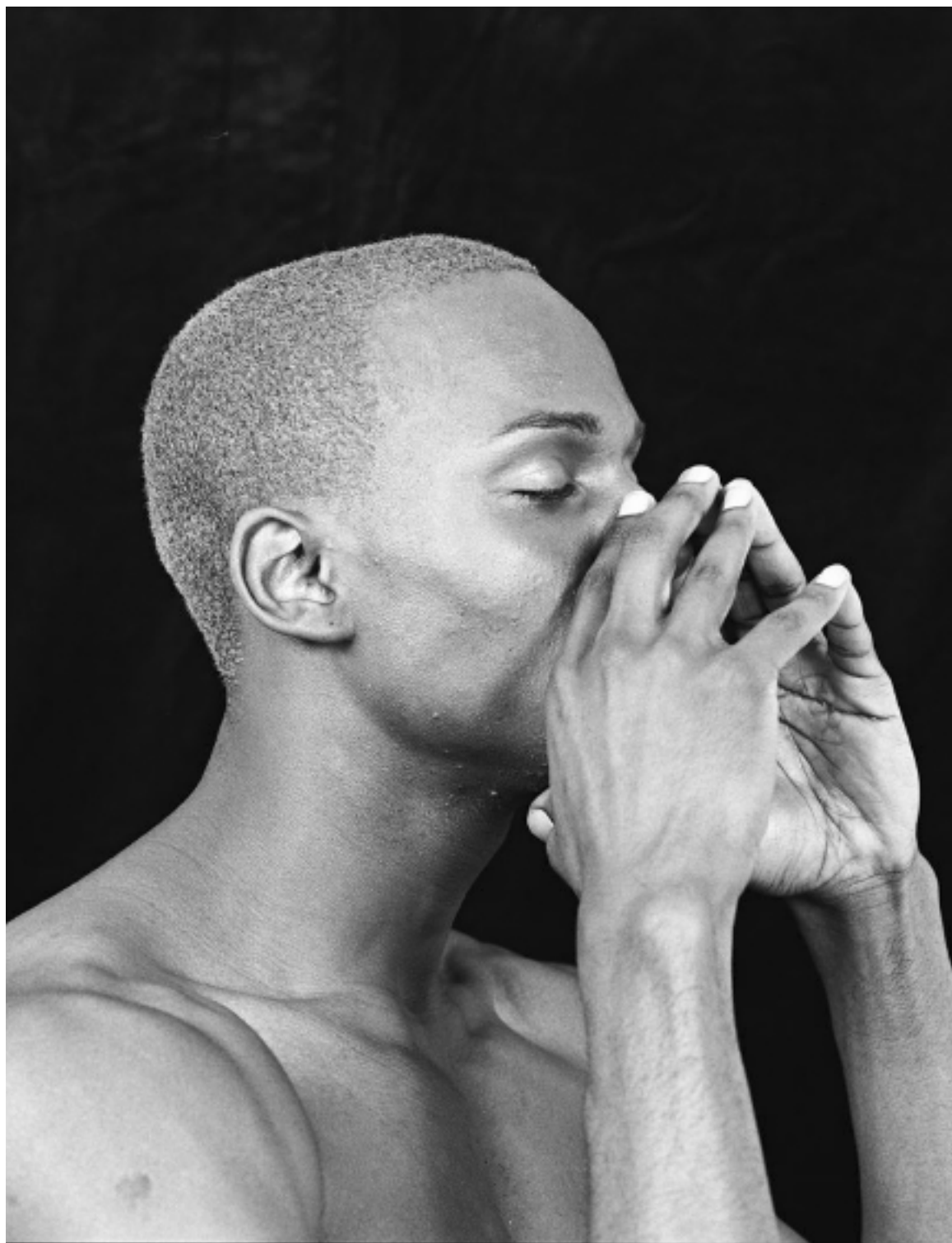
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A Finger Of Greeneye (synopsis for a gay cowboy film) Christopher Barnes

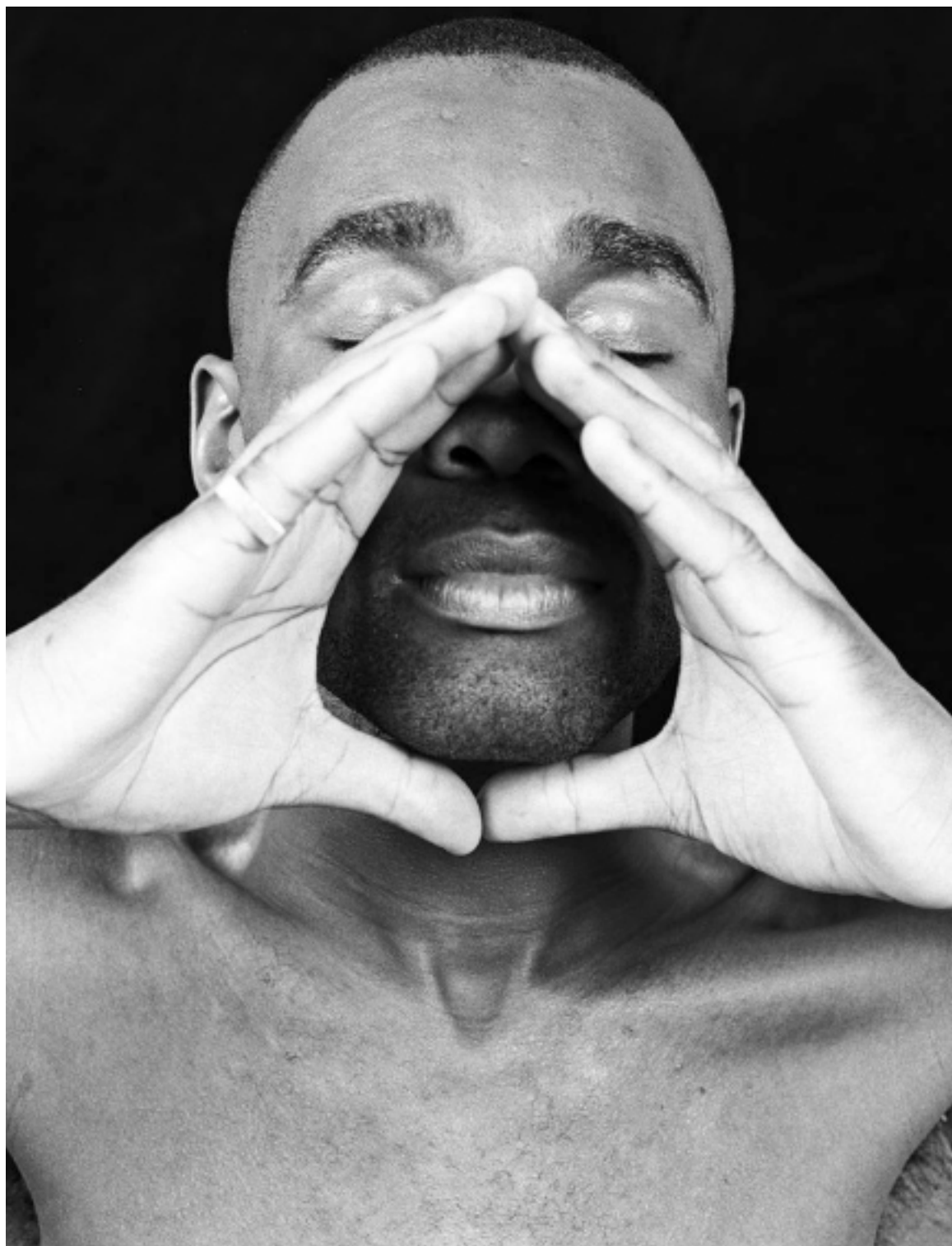
The rifleman check-reins his steed.
Mustang tracks dance in the dirt.
It's a beggared gorge
Where bluff hillocks tilt
Down to a thinning runnel.
He pans the climbs softly-softly
Through long-range field glasses.
The flint rises to orangeish mesas
Flecked with nickel ores.

But Chester and Bruce have already reached the saloon,
Lined up a first pitcher,
Pulling off clothes by leaps and bounds
To the right side of the bunk.

22



Ajamu X
XXXXXXX XXXX



23

Ajamu X
XXXXXXXX XXXXX

On the Town

Simon Edge

24

LUCA IS talking to Dane, using his shoulders and his eyes as much as his mouth. He can hold his own perfectly, albeit without a thought to accent or grammar, and if he thinks Dane's name is James, that is only because of the din. Dane - leaner, blonder, with too many teeth for his mouth - leans down and presents his ear, eyes slitted in concentration, but not strictly listening. He is looking at the bump of bicep on Luca's perfect-scale arm, thinking of later on, and how to get there. In a second he will ask Luca again what he does for a living, and Luca will wonder if he is too drunk.

Luca tells him, when asked, that he lives in Parsons Green, not far from the Tube. He doesn't mention that two years ago he was raped outside his flat by three men, first the normal way, then with a bottle. Gayness didn't seem to be a factor; it was his stature that offended. Of course he will not tell Dane this. He has told only Giovanna, his best friend in Rome, and the nurses - not even his mother. Anyway, he does not think about it every day.

Luca moves aside as Mark pushes past, clasp ing three pint glasses in a precarious cloverleaf and wearing a tee-shirt with 5UCK MY D1.CK on the back. He is aiming for the counter that runs down the centre of the room, where his friends are sitting at high stools draped with coats. You took your time, says Michael. The gum-chewing glass-collector has already taken away their empties in a curving tower. Mark gives Michael a look and lets him take his beer. He passes the other glass to Eugene, whose new beard he still can't get used to. They resume where they left off, laughing at stories they already know. This is what they always like to do.

At the moment it's the yarn about the piano tuner on the bicycle. Their eyes are bright, because they know how it will end, these three friends with their similar crops and their similar tee-shirts cutting off similar tattoos at the same point of the upper arm. There are some yarns they don't tell. Mark doesn't tell the one about the night he was hit with a cricket bat on Streatham Common (he still has blackouts six years on, and is on incapacity benefit). Eugene doesn't tell how his father threw him out for being gay when he was sixteen and never spoke to him again, wouldn't see him, even when he was dying of drink, the old bastard. Michael doesn't talk about lying on his own deathbed in St Thomas', in that dreadful year before the pills rattled to the rescue. Everyone has those stories, everyone knows them, and they don't seem relevant nowadays, especially now that Michael has started popping another kind of pill and has a chest out to here. There are better things to talk about.

Derek, picking the label off his bottle of Becks,

finds himself prised away from the counter and out into the open bar. He is wondering whether he should take his beanie hat off. His coat is stashed under the counter, and it's getting warmer in the bar, but he has kept the hat on because it flatters him, makes him look younger. The problem is that people will assume it's a cover for baldness, which it isn't really. He smiles, thinking he's still the same after all these years, always fretting - then sees who he has smiled at, and turns away. It's a farce, this business. It hasn't changed since the first time he was here, when he met John. Aye aye: clock that, platinum blond, blue tie, three o'clock.

John died ten years ago. Derek didn't attend the funeral, because John's parents - liberal, middle-class - wouldn't tell him where it was. He was thrown out of the flat in Hornsey because it was officially John's, even though he had put all that money into the new suite for the bathroom. He has some good memories of their five years together, and some photos, but he has moved on now, and has had a few boyfriends since. He has not betrayed John by continuing to live.

Over by the condom dispenser, ice-blond Neil notices Derek watching him - flattering, mate, but not tonight - and turns back to the freebie magazine Nelson is showing him. Nelson is delighted because they have printed his picture in the clubbing section, stripped to the waist and beaming chemically, with his arms around his friends Carlos and Richard. Of the three, he has come off best. Carlos is cute, everyone thinks so, but has taken too much K, and Richard - poor Richard! - is beginning to thicken at the waist, however much he tries to hold it in. At least you can't see the flecks of grey.

The picture doesn't quite show (not in this light, anyway) the scar across Nelson's coffee-smooth left breast where his attackers cut him, to check he was unconscious, before they set about his flat in Rio. It seems surreal now. He was in a bar, just after the big split with Sergio. Someone offered him a drink, someone so beautiful he couldn't believe his luck. He woke in his own bed three days later to find his flat gutted of stereo, clothes, passport, furniture - the bed was the only thing left. He went to the police, but they said what did he expect with his lifestyle. They never even interviewed his doorman, who saw everyone come and go from the building, and who looked away after that whenever Nelson walked past.

It wasn't all bad, because if it hadn't happened he wouldn't have moved to London. And he rather likes his scar. He could have covered it when he got the sun-tattoo that flames around his nipple, but he decided not to.

Nelson feels a hand on his rump, and glances at Sanjay, who is trying to get to the bar in the crush. He has just arrived with Deepak and Steven, up from Essex, and it's his bad luck to get the first round. He's sweating, even with his jacket knotted around his waist. They are planning to go downstairs later, as long as Deepak can find the guy he gets his pills from. All Sanjay knows is he needs to get fucked tonight. It really is a need; he doesn't know what he would do without the collection of rubber replicas under the bed. Sometimes he wonders about this craving for an invasion that makes bigger men's eyes water just at the thought. But mainly he thinks about how to satisfy it.

A remembered face at the bar, looking odd in straight-after-work clothes, but still the same smile. How are you, all right? Jonathan, that was his name, does something in the City. Sanjay remembers that night very well: up to the elbow for the first time. He looks again and gets another smile. Maybe he can engineer a rematch. He'll stop for a chat on the way to the bog, see if Jonathan's going downstairs.

Barry picks up his briefcase from between his legs and says he's off home. He's driving up north to see his mother tomorrow, her first birthday since his father died, so he really does have to be up early. He's flattered when his friends want him to stay. They're a good bit younger, but they're some of the best he has ever had. Civilians never really understand what makes you tick, but with these

chaps you don't need to explain. He met them in the support group when he was thrown off his ship, and it's one of the things he consoles himself with, if ever he wonders what might have been. The group helped overturn the law. If they had done it five years sooner, Barry would be in command of his own frigate by now, but he is training himself not to think like that.

On the way out he nods at the doorman who gave him a dirty smile on the way in. He will star in his fantasies later.

Brian the doorman returns Barry's good night and carries on talking to vacant Vicky who does the coatcheck downstairs and has come up for her break. Tonight she's stoned even earlier than usual; it will be mayhem at the end when they all want to leave. He's pleased to see her, though, because it can be boring out here, clicking the customers in and out. He likes the effect he has, from appreciation to awe, but he is forgotten once they get inside.

At school they pushed him around, called him all sorts. The second time his head got flushed down the toilet, he got some weights and started lifting them in his bedroom. After that, it became an addiction. Nowadays, he can walk the length of Old Compton Street holding hands with Nick, his other half, and the straight boys get out of his way.

"If only they knew," Nick sometimes says, when they look at the reaction they get, and Barry agrees. ■

25

A Field of Stars

Lisa Matthews

That night I went to find it. It was there,
I could tell, hidden in the shy, wet earth.
I rolled up my sleeve and began to push
my hand in. I met with resistance and
could feel movement all around my fingers.
I had almost forgotten how I felt
as I watched you walking out of the field
with moonlight on your back, tucking in your
shirt, how the next day you cooked me chestnuts,
skimming skin from milk in a boiling pan.

The Aftermath

Ernesto Sarezale

26

He left something behind the morning after.
I found it almost by chance. It was hidden
in the plies of soiled linen. It dropped
from the sheets as I shook them, as though
the hole from a cigarette burn had gone loose
and was aired with the hairs and the smells.
But we did not smoke the night before.
Wrinkly, stretchy, bold, ridiculous,
much bigger than I remembered it,
what now lay on the floor was his bellybutton.
That little bit I'd licked with the tip of my tongue.
I picked it up, glad I hadn't stepped on it,
wiped the fluff and held it with extraneous pleasure.
I stretched it to sheath my right thumb; it fitted
like a thimble of flesh. I covered it up
with a pink rubber glove and then proceeded
to do the washing. It was midday by then.
Scraps of breakfast cluttering the sink.
Sunday afternoon unfocused mind.
I imagined him sinking in the tub,
contemplating his new orifice,
wondering whether he should call back.
I put the soggy navel in one of those drawers
where one jumbles up miscellany:
foreign currency, outdated flyers,
torn rubber bands or borrowed photographs.
It looked obscenely ominous in there.
Then I waited and forgot. I heard his voice
a few days later on the answer machine.
'Do you remember me?' he said 'I think
I left something behind the morning after.
Have you spotted my leather cock ring
with stainless steel studs by any chance?'
I phoned him back, explained I had not seen the item,
but invited him to come and have a look
I tidied up the flat, left his bellybutton on my bed-
side table.

I was eager to see him again.
When he arrived, he rushed into the bathroom.
He had to wee, he said, but the noises and moans
I heard suggested he was busy with other affairs
Was he looking for his navel in there?
Why was he running water in the bath?
He came out, agitated and flustered,
apologetic, a stupid grin on his face.
I couldn't wait. I led him straight to the bedroom.
I displayed for him my collection of sex toys.
He didn't pay attention, of course; his eyes were stuck
to the bedside table. 'Is that a bellybutton?'
I pretended I did not understand.
I extracted explanations and ashamed confessions;
any excuse to have him shirtless again, really.
Embarrassed, like a teenager ashamed of her period,
he showed me the blood soaked tampon he had inserted
into his belly-hole and argued that the stretchy bit
belonged in there. 'Are you sure, Cinderella?'
I thought. 'Let's give it a try. Does it fit?'
It drove him almost to tears. The navel,
stretched beyond recognition, and moist,
rejected his skin. It belonged to me now.
He left like he left the first time: his navel behind,
avoiding my eyes with a gloomy 'goodbye'.
I didn't know whether I'd see him again,
but I was left with his navel, which fits my thumb
like a thimble of flesh. That's mine now.

Ice

Steve Cook

HE LIES on his stomach, face dipped into the pillow, the sweat gathering in the long brown valley of his back to shine like polish.

"Come on, man," he whispers. "Cool me down."

I rattle the ice in the glass. We're fourteen floors up and all the windows are open, but the air hangs around us in a long, breathless sulk. I imagine his shoulders roasting to crackling in the heat, the smouldering forest of his armpit bursting into flame. Almost smell the baked singe of skin. I run a finger down his spine, shake the glass again.

"Cool me down, baby, cool me down."

He turns his head on the pillow and the lines of wet in his neck glitter in the sunlight. The sheets have collapsed around him, sodden from our bodies. Their tang drifts through the room - the salt-sweat smell of sex and the creamy sweetness of the stuff he puts on his hair. I suck in a clean cube of ice, crunch it. It breaks in my mouth like tiny bones.

"Ah, come on, come on."

A wave of needs surfs along his shoulders. I strip down to my shorts and clamber on top of him, slotting my knees firmly against his thighs. Run the side of my hand like an iron up the long groove of his back. Make a fist and push the oily skin over the bones of his spine. He shudders beneath me.

"The ice," he says. "The ice."

I balance the frosty glass on the bed. It tips and falls against his ribs. He cries out as if burned.

"Easy, easy," I tell him, clawing out a cube and pressing it down over the inky smudge of hair just above his buttocks. Let the heat of my hand melt it away to nothing. He moans as if I'm still inside him. I pull the cubes out fast, dropping them onto his shoulders, his arms. Pressing them into his neck. Tracing the swirls of the curling blue tattoo that climbs around his bicep. My sticky hands sliding over him as the misty blocks puddle away into his body.

"That's your lot," I tell him, climbing off to let him roll over.

"Man," he says, laughing at his erection. "That was hot. Cold, but hot."

I hand him the empty glass and let him run it over his forehead. He brushes down his slick chest hair.

"I can't bear this," he says. "I've gotta cool down. I should have bought a fan before they all sold out. How come you're not all wet?"

I rub my hands together, the salt and almond smell of his skin on my fingers. I watch his erection, wary, ready to dodge out of its range. He goes to the kitchen for a cold beer and I stand on his balcony and squint at the burning blue sky. I remember the first time he brought me out here and showed off his view: the glass tower of his bank, now ghosted with haze, looming greedily over the city, and the

canal far below, a scorching line of fire.

"I'll be a rich man before I'm forty," he told me. "I'll have everything this city has to offer."

"You must be doing okay to afford this flat."

"This is nothing, baby. You hang around and you'll see." He pulled me close and rubbed his stubble against my cheek. "London's ripe and lazy. It needs plundering." He kissed my ear. "And you'll get your share. Now that you're mine."

He comes back to the bedroom, rolling the beer bottle from nipple to nipple. I take a swallow and let the bitter fizz settle to blood temperature in my mouth. Halfway down the bottle, I hand it over.

"You hungry?" he says from the bed.

"It's too hot to eat."

"Come on, we'll go out to dinner. Somewhere air-conditioned. Let me feed you up."

And I imagine him, his fingers sweet and sticky, cramming food into my mouth, rich, fattening, sickening, swelling me up. Making me so heavy I can never walk away from him. But he's no longer all I want to feed on.

"No."

"What about that place where they did that prawn thing you loved? And that amazing cheese-cake? The first time I took you out."

"That was a long time ago."

"They'll still do the prawn thing. How about it?"

"It's too hot."

He shrugs and swipes his hands under his armpits.

"You're right. Prawns in this weather? Maybe not."

"I might have a sandwich. Later. At home."

The first hint of a breeze touches my hair, a cool quiet lick on the back of my neck. I raise my face, but it's quickly gone.

"You off, then? Already?"

"I think so."

I wait for him to join the dots, to taste the change in the air, but he doesn't get there. The heat's sapped his instinct for danger. He just runs a hand through his sodden hair, pulls it into spikes and sniffs his fingers.

"Man, I need a shower." He jumps up. "Coming?"

One long final cleansing. I follow him into the bathroom. He turns the water on, adjusts the temperature and gets under. He raises his face to the downpour, tongue out, shaking his head under the cascade. The water sweeps over his brown skin, down through the rivulet of hair on his belly, and runs off his cock like he's peeing.

I get in, close the door, and shrink at the sudden coolness. Flick the dial towards the red. His hand moves to change it, but then he turns away, shrugs. Once we'd have fought over this, mock

battles for control. Palms pushing at each other's chests, knees nudging legs apart, slipping in the foamy water and banging our backs against the tiles. Panting, aggressive, eyes glittering for dominance, tongues touching for submission. Later, towelling down hard and checking each other out for bruises. Now we're just two men in a shower, passing each other the soap.

He smears a handful of gel into his hair and mixes it into a froth that runs down his face. And I'm captured by the memory of crevice, bone and skin: how my tongue moved over them, long fiery nights on his shattered bed, my mouth dry and thirsty for the rich damp of his chest, armpit, groin. I watch the shampoo slide down his body. It envelopes him, then washes away. His skin gleams, a few inches, but a lifetime away from me. He turns his face back into the tepid water, and the stream breaks over his shoulders, spray bouncing into my eyes.

"Far too warm for me," he laughs, and gets out, the sterile air of the bathroom floating in behind him. I watch him dry himself through the frosted glass, a shadow man, scrubbing at his head with a clump of blue.

When I'm clean, I come through, collecting my clothes from the floor. He bought them all for me. I stood in my pants in shops while he snapped his

fingers at assistants and told them how to dress me.

"Look at my boy," he told them. "You think he looks hot?"

He kept none of the receipts, as if nothing would ever have to go back. He made me his taste, his look.

He's standing on his balcony, the towel tucked around his waist, waiting for the first breath of evening. There's a long splodge of oily sweat already forming on his back. The ghost of me stays behind him and licks his neck, fingers stroking his belly, trying to tug the towel away from his buttocks. I couldn't get enough of him, couldn't thrust or suck or stroke enough to satisfy myself. There wasn't a pore I didn't want to seep myself into. His body was my sunshine, my boiling summer, but I had too much of it, and sickened and blistered in his heat. Now I want mist and shade. To have a shadow of my own. I give his shoulder the lightest possible touch. "I have to go now."

He turns, still laughing. Here's a man who doesn't understand the cold. A man whose life has always been summer.

"Hey, there's more ice in the fridge. Get back into bed and I'll do you. Lie down, and let me turn you on. My turn to get you hot."

But I am colder now than I've ever been. ■

Be Me

Lisa Matthews

I breathe in as you exhale. The sun butters the window pane. Across the field the starlings settle in a perfect square fallen fallow. Dry earth needs rain and storm clouds choke behind the western horizon. Your clock ticks, tracing a perfect semi-circle with a quiet hand. No one will see this but me, I feel small under the weight of it, unequal to the measure of these days. Keep my appointments, then tell me again how you feel.

The Waiter

Andrew Warburton

I

Oysters slip, slide into guts.
Candles, ferns, Parisian landscapes;

and pineapple poured over crème de menthe
in lily-shaped glasses;

the Turkish waiter flutters
like a red admiral

in a perfume of memory:
the vapour of a home he once had.

His lover lies shaded, taken by fever
in a villa on the Black Sea's mouth.

II

Pavements hiss. The mist
intensifies,

a skein that fills with liquid
and bursts.

The ferns recall woodlands,
a room of steam;

he dreams of market stalls
and sunburnt mosques,

the patch of shade
where his lips were kissed.

Fleeting

Gerson Nason

POSSIBLY YOU might recall me. We met the other night on the *Starved for Love* website and had a nice chat. We both agreed that life is totally unfair. We both like dining solo at KFC (as I recall, you liked the Two-Piece Colonel's Meal while I like the Three-Piece Meal). You said you worked in graphic design and liked films; I told you about my interest in writing poetry. You thought I would not be interested in you because you are Korean, but I want to say that that makes me even more interested. I have always had a fascination with men from the Orient. I have never gone out with a Korean before, but I know lots of Korean-Americans and they are nice people.

I also appreciate the fact that you gave yourself a Medium rating in terms of love starvation. I rate myself a Medium as well. It's good to speak openly about love starvation. For too long it's been kept in the closet. Although I would not reject someone outright because they rated themselves Extreme in terms of love starvation, I think Medium is a better level to work from. By the same

too soon. For all you know, I could be a child murderer (Don't worry, I'm not). You're very sensitive, too, which is a quality I like... and a crybaby. (Hey, I'm supposed to be the only crybaby in a relationship!) The thing is, we will soon be on opposite sides of the planet, and don't you think this is all a little sudden? And why do you prefer me to call you by your English name when your Korean name is so much more beautiful?

That week we spent together in Seoul was star-crossed. I was not overly impressed by the city. It was like a giant dormitory of white-brick apartment buildings crisscrossed with 12-lane boulevards, but that hardly mattered. The August heat was swamp-like; street life was lively and Asia (my first trip) is such an exotic place. I got a lot of great bargains on shirts and would have bought more if I had planned better. The trip to the DMZ was amazing. You might laugh at me, but I thought the Korean countryside was wonderful, such an interesting mixture of terrain and vegetation. And

It's good to speak openly about love starvation. For too long it's been kept in the closet. Although I would not reject someone outright because they rated themselves Extreme in terms of love starvation, I think Medium is a better level to work from.

token, I think I would have too little in common with someone who said they had a Low love starvation rating. For me, love starvation is that secret ingredient that makes a relationship work.

If the timing is right, I would like to meet you. How would next week be? We could meet in a Borders Bookstore café in the centre of town and then make our way to a nearby restaurant to get to know each other. As we both know from experience, meeting in person is the acid test. If anything is to happen between us, it will be based on that.

I look forward to hearing back from you. I have a good feeling about our contact so far and hope you do, too.

That remark about your grandmother being unhappy really caught me off guard. In America, we say, "Would you like to see my grandmother's etchings?" In any case, the result was the same, but I was surprised by your sudden deep emotions. You hardly know me. I mean, I am very flattered - don't get me wrong - and you are a beautiful man. There is something alabaster about your physique and your thick hair is to die for. I'm astonished you never have to exercise. Still, it's

those people we chatted to on our tour bus, that *Financial Times* correspondent, the young couple from Iowa, the Australian girl teaching English in Pusan. It was like God had made a plan for us. I felt so close to you and I think people looked at us and saw our special connection. Later, eating dinner at the Marriott, then lying in bed and watching reruns of *Sex and the City*, I thought it could get no better than this.

You remember it differently. You liked my photo on the website. To you, I looked like "a cold-blooded Aryan," even though I told you from the beginning I was Jewish. I remember noticing all sorts of points in common about our respective families of origin - that conditional love ran rampant through both our backgrounds - but you say it was all about casual sex for you. Once, when I asked you why you had gone to that particular website on that particular night, you said you liked to surf lots of chat-rooms.

I was back in Paris recently. It was hard not to drift back to the neighbourhood near La Tour our Montparnasse where we stayed. I stopped by that

supermarket where we stocked up on cheeses and meats. Believe it or not, some of the people behind the deli counter were the same and I think they even recognized me. They were probably wondering what I was doing there without you. I was too embarrassed, in my broken French, to explain to them. Later, I walked past the flat where we stayed. There was laundry drying on the balcony and I heard a CD playing Gershwin. I felt slightly self-conscious — as if the current occupants knew I was there alone, and were wondering what I had done to get you to leave me.

So, this is what it's about if you're a gay man of a certain age looking to settle down. Once there was no shortage of men willing to have me; now the pickings are slim. One day you're the centre of attention in a crowded club; a few years later

you're haunting support groups and "love starvation" websites. My dad always used to say: "What's it all about?" I thought he meant it was about relationships — the people who are in your life — making those moments count. Now, I think he was making it up, or else I'm just extremely unlucky. That's probably it: I was born unlucky.

One final comment. That Sunday afternoon in September when we climbed to the top of the Arc de Triomphe and had a clear perspective in all directions felt like a moment in a movie that had become true. I had to pinch myself that this was actually happening to me, that I deserved this type of happiness. The word "fleeting" comes to mind. I won't go into what that's about, but I think the meaning is evident. ■

Two Women at Miami International River Wolton

31

The final hundred yards.
Your hand gloves mine,
I become colossal,
legs articulated to support
a superhuman weight.

A man stared at us
all through the last half-hour,
as if trying to count our breasts.
I leaned my face to you
put my fingers through
the armholes in your t-shirt.

The digital clock
has guzzled minutes,
it sits bloated
in the departure lounge
vying to outgrow me.

I'm planning the next seconds -
how I will kiss you,
your glasses in your fist,
each glance
full of hours.

Throat

Christopher Nield

32

This throat is white as the water's fur.
The long white stretch to the tethered skull.
The bare white pulse
Open to the outcast stare.
That life -
That beating there.

That silent curl,
The wreath around the base,
The marble scruff
Plumes with fearsome colour
Simple carelessness,
The perfect whiteness
Of the figure, here,
And gives his form
A certain
Cut -

A beauty - not that
Statuesque stain
Of bodies embarrassed by the life they train.
The life that can contain
Such pain.

This throat is cold
To the imagined touch.
Unflushed, unstirred,
The owner cannot hear
The world that tries to desecrate
Such graceful hate

(A callousness
Of flesh, in such
Vicious
Natural reign).

He is only half aware
Of the peaceful, helpless stare,
The wake of expectation, where
Volition fearful

In the feet that move
Will prove
The viscera of another loss.

An emblem of certain
Failure:
The sterile suppleness
Of the body
Standing
So assuredly;
The station of the figure
The world
Tries to possess.

Perceive the scene:
The sculptural
Mass of random hair.
Conceive
The simple humanness
Of something
So opaque to sense,
The fleshy screen
That hides all signs
Of being close
To us:

The informal progress
That shows
The hard disparity
With others hideous:

The hands bound
To touching
Quick insentience.

Listening for Voices

Beverley Duguid

DURING THE night I woke with a particular line from your letter. Something, which when I remembered reading it, made me irritated and frustrated that I couldn't reply to you straight away and then in an instant it was gone. I scrambled out of bed to get the pieces of paper from the bin, to put the untruths back together. I found the line and I was

each other so close I still felt your hand prints on my back and on my thighs, your hot breath on my neck, the next day.

We often walked back from the shops or the market to my flat; exhausted, we'd fall asleep in the afternoon or watch unbelievable American films about children on the run to find their real

You slept pillow-less, supine, bare shouldered, the blankets covering the rest of your bareness - your beauty. I curled up next to you, my lips brushing your skin, our shades of brown like colours on a fabric wheel.

right; you had written it. I was still hurt that you'd decided: "Now isn't the time to talk." We had always talked.

We sat in parks and open spaces talking for hours - in lunch breaks, after work and on days stolen from our routines. We made space for each other around meetings and visits, in between boring staff training and fifteen-minute tea breaks. You'd turn up outside my workplace on your bike with a rose in your back pocket or a dog-eared cartoon card. I accepted your gifts and invitations to tea. I felt wooed, chased, sought after. At the beginning you always said: "From the moment I met you, your smile hasn't left me" and my heart would dissolve into sugary liquid. Our lives fitted together - a jigsaw puzzle satisfyingly done, a mystery solved.

As we grew closer, we looked hungrily for open spaces, as if rooms were too contained for us. The circle of trees in Green Park and the pathways in Hyde Park were favourite talking places. We'd sit on the grass sowing the seeds of early love. When we did venture indoors, we met in steamy cafés and sat among builders and tradesmen and old age pensioners smoking fiercely. You ate soft eggs and chips with beans, sometimes mushrooms to compensate for the lack of healthy food on your plate. I ate baked potatoes with beans or cheese, and I stole your chips every now and again momentarily forgetting a preoccupation with my thighs. I wanted to take you to posh French patisseries where the waitresses wore long aprons and served frothy cappuccinos, petits fours and mille feuilles.

We walked within spaces, along tired London pavements, weedy canal pathways, and on misty Sunday mornings we'd walk home from sweaty-walled clubs, where we'd only looked at each other all night, and I'd watched you move chaotically but beautifully to Studio One tunes, and we'd held

families, or about nannies who married their rich employers. Sometimes we'd make love for hours - sleepy love that made my legs tired or love so new and dangerous it made me think of edges of cliffs, or the time I'd taken the cable car in Barcelona high above the city only to realise that my fear of heights was real.

We'd wake to discover it was time for bed and we hadn't eaten. I'd make you cheese on toast or pasta with basil and tomato and you'd fall asleep immediately afterwards and sometimes I sat up next to you watching TV, your locks spread out like a fan over the bed sheets. I'd watch your eyes flicker, jealous of your dreams.

You slept pillow-less, supine, bare shouldered, the blankets covering the rest of your bareness - your beauty. I curled up next to you, my lips brushing your skin, our shades of brown like colours on a fabric wheel. I wanted to kiss you between your breasts or climb on top of you, into you. I imagined fighting through your muscles, telling your cells of my love for you, kissing your heart tenderly, watching each beat pump the life force, that vitality I loved, through your body.

On Monday mornings when you left for work, I'd find remnants of you, half-finished cups of tea and toast or small post-it notes with messages scribbled like "hello gorgeous" or "hi sexy" or "smile" stuck inside my laptop, on cereal boxes, on the bathroom mirror. They made me catch my breath.

We lived together for a while but fell into a see-saw of wanting and not saying, or saying too much and then hurting each other for not delivering. I loved you and wanted to please you, but wanted to please everyone else, too, so I became a ball of sickness. It was early winter, golden and amber leaves still on the ground, sodden and wet from the October rain. The nights were dark and

silent. People rushed home to watch soap families, pretend lives on TV whilst reality fell into disrepair around them. At the same time my life became filled with ultimatums and accusations. I was so used to measuring the success of our relationship against what you wanted that the position of blame was easy for me to accept. You said you could take no more of my disloyalty and would leave me to sort myself out. I would join you only when I was healed, whole. I felt broken, an anchor wedged at the bottom of the sea, small fish swimming in and out of my metal arms and legs.

It seemed you were packing for months. You arrived home periodically with boxes and tape and eventually when your new place was ready you packed slowly and methodically for two days. I stayed out of your way, moving around you, pretending to be interested in books I'd forgotten I had.

On the day you left I came home from work to find empty spaces on the book shelves, pockets of dust and popped bubble wrap scattered in the corridor. "I didn't have time to sweep," you said. The flat felt used and disrespected. I thought of you in your new place, surrounded by boxes and the new furniture I helped you choose. My flat, a desert in comparison, reminded me of when I moved in, a new homeowner, but the emptiness at the time felt fresh. I had filled it with my mountain of books, two cheap unsteady book shelves, a sensible dark blue sofa-bed and a double divan bed, because I loved the height off the floor.

As I tidied the flat, I found objects you'd left in your hurry to depart: an unopened bank statement, a birthday card I'd given you, a silver earring you'd lost the year before. I followed this trail of objects as I attempted to return my belongings to some sort of order. You had taken the bed, so I slept on the sofa-bed in the living room. Over the next few months my flat became a bedsit. I hated the bedroom and only went there in the mornings to dress and iron my clothes. I found a picture of Michaelangelo's Pieta I'd bought when I was on the Art Survey course and pinned it on the wall. I spent hours staring at it, or meditating in the corpse pose, listening out for a voice to say everything is okay, but nothing came. The silence made me calm, calmer than I was during the day when I walked around thinking of death and how it would come, how to get to the end of the street without collapsing, dying.

At night I couldn't sleep, so I watched comedies for hours without laughing, then cried at wars, bombings and missing children, and sometimes when I was gripped with fear I'd call you. You'd try to calm me, suggest deep breathing and proper sitting positions, but I sensed an irritation in your voice, a longing for me to be normal, to disentangle myself from my problematic life. I imagined my funeral, people crying, wondering why I'd gone. My family in black, my friends looking sullen-eyed and surprised. Grief settled like a veil around me. For a year I walked around with it gripping my shoulders, shifting in and out of my heart until I admitted it was there and it decided to leave me.

I thought my soul so damaged by the loss of you that I would never enjoy walking again. I sat listening to couples' conversations in coffee shops, their mundane topics reminded me of ours. Sometimes we'd pick a topic and spend several minutes talking about, say, walking. How we walked down the street together, who annoyed whom by their pace, whether to hold hands and where it was safe to do so. Which friends or family members annoyed us by the way they walked. We'd estimate together how long it took us to get to a certain point and which one of us would get there first. I began to retrace journeys we'd made: the time in Paris we thought we could walk to the 16th Arrondissement from Bastille as long as we kept going north, stopping finally, tired and hungry and, after an over-priced Chinese meal, almost out of money on the first day of our holiday. Now I walked in circles, never reaching a point.

One weekend in Oxford, with friends, we walked to the Bridge of Sighs from Headington, then round the Bodleian Library and across to Christ Church College, round to the river and back to Headington, engaging them in our occupation. In the main Dining Room at Christ Church, pictures of old Oxonians lined the walls. Someone asked me who John Wesley was and I suddenly couldn't remember who he was and why he was famous and what he'd done. I managed a small explanation,

As I tidied the flat, I found objects you'd left in your hurry to depart: an unopened bank statement, a birthday card I'd given you, a silver earring you'd lost the year before.

my sentence trailing off into thin air and the space in between our breath was filled with a sigh. We passed the door where Robert Peel's name was written in large letters, and my mouth opened in

explanation but closed again; I knew too little about Peel and Catholics, and left it unsaid.

A man in a bowler hat stood on the green to prevent us non-Oxonians from crossing and going along disallowed routes. We stopped to take pictures and admire spires, our eyes cast upwards.

That night I dreamt of John Wesley preaching on a street corner. A woman with a child listened intently, pulling her shawl round her baby, the street wet with rain, her dress sweeping the dirt on the ground. In the dream I could remember who he was and exactly why he was famous. He whispered in my ear, God speaks the truth and everything will be okay, and I woke drenched in sweat, mumbling some forgotten words which I tried all day to remember.

I travelled back to London thinking that all that talking we did still left me unheard. And the memory of us sitting on the grass in some park somewhere in London felt surreal and vague as if it had not happened. A beautiful woman looked me up and down on the bus; I held her gaze until it left my face and her deep brown eyes lowered back to her book. I turned towards the window, closed my eyes and imagined us laying next to each other in a white room, her sleeping and her hair spread over the bed sheet, she supine, bare-shouldered, me breathing in her scent and climbing on top of her, planting a kiss between her breasts as I enter her body fighting through the muscles, veins and cells. I reach her heart and watch it pump, pump, pump. ■

35

Coast

Robert Hamberger

While the others trek to the lighthouse
we're walking away from the sea.
The sun's out. We move closer to the gorse,
breathing its coconut scent. Then us three
weave up the hill, two men and a girl,
half a family. We stop to rest.
I wonder if any of this will fill
your head one morning: how the sun cast
narrow shadows; why that thicket leans
away from the sea. We look for dolphins
finding only waves, while that bird preens
itself on a fence. If no-one listens
it still throws its song to open air,
those sparkling notes a gift going nowhere.

Hockney

Chris Beckett

36

Unsocked, unshod, a little like old fauns,
sometimes we shower together
if the cubicle is generous and the shower-head
a wide well-punctured rose,
and this action of lifting our faces together into the mock rain,
of washing each other or simply dropping the soap
and plunging after it with streams of laughter,
makes us feel like Californian boys in a Hockney drawing,
turning our superb bottoms to a roomful of art-lovers,
while the water splashes off our shoulders in thick black lines.

Then after lunch, you lie face-down on the bed
wearing only a polo-shirt,
which makes me think again of Hockney,
but this time the super-smooth acrylic portrait of his lover
lying on Macy's amazing non-crease bedspread,
in a pose that instantly reminds the art historian in us
of Boucher's Mademoiselle O'Murphy
and her astoundingly bouncy derriere.

It hardly matters that ours are not quite as plum as they were:
just to see them again is a revelation!
It's as if we'd borrowed Hockney's specs
and his peculiar weak eye-sight
which makes him lean forward and study his subject so carefully .
Only then, peering through the weight of happy water
that is the holiday shower in a good hotel,
does this wonderful process of artistic fantasy begin,
pastelling our buttocks in pinks and creams
and turning us into our own delighted bottom queens.

Je Suis Un Security Guard

Daniel Noquet

I NOTICE this boy in the bookshop with a baby in his arms. They've both got the same quite nice, semi-elfin features. Nearly sweetly evil looking. I can't take my eyes off them. Start following them round like a creep. The baby - who's more of a toddler - is wearing a coat with bunnies on it. I tread on toes of someone and say, "Sorry," because I'm too busy staring to look where I'm going. That someone says, "Watch where you're going!"

"Sorry." Again.

I move like TV detective along aisle down middle of shop, vaguely noticing Ainsley Harriott's grinning face, which I hate, staring at me from big hardback.

Boy keeps swapping kid from arm to arm whilst not really looking at books. He's strong, must be, the way he holds the near-toddler in his arms like that, with face impassive.

The baby's hair isn't scraggy blonde with dyed green like the boy's is. Just pale hair. I'm guessing he's her brother. Looks about seventeen.

Little voice in head says: "Stop staring, you freak."

Just as I'm about to try to stop being such a weirdo, I hear him speak. He's gazing dreamily now into the pages of a book, and at first doesn't notice when kiddy starts patting his chin. Then I see from the side-view of his long eyelashes that he's lowered his gaze from the book he'd held up to his nose (maybe he's shortsighted), and is looking tenderly at the child. I am bizarrely, hungrily, anxious to see what his expression is now, so I move fast across shop, till I'm only five feet away. I see his face: a quick

smile. Brief glimpse of such warm, well, love, which I doubt I'll ever have aimed my way, and I realise, "Shit, he's the kid's dad!" And immediately hate myself for fancying a straight bloke in such a predatory homosexual stalker kind of way, especially as I often bang on about how much I hate self-loathing gays who always fancy unattainable heterosexuals.

Softly, he says: "I'll just be a minute," then he says her name, which I forget immediately, and next he says: "Daddy's reading."

Something about that "Daddy's reading" makes me feel something.

He notices me then as though he already had, because his eyes go instantly from snowflakes falling down on her to hailstones raining my way. I'm not sure if it's because I'm wearing my security guard uniform, but he's giving me a filthy look. Maybe he's

clocked the homo-ness of my gaze, as well as the securityguardness. Or he's such an anarchist (I'm guessing that from the state of him) he thinks even lollipop ladies are oppressors and need taking out.

I blush, but meet his gaze: I'm allowed to stare; I'm a security guard, it's what we do. I make him blush, blink, look away, suddenly all Lady-Di-like. Puts book back. I notice title: *Women Who Kill, And the Men Who Love Them*. Has classic Myra Hindley mugshot on cover, along with a few other international A-list murderesses, also a few D-list killers who I wouldn't know if they walked up and stabbed me.

The boy, now a man to me with the realization of his fatherhood, glides away through the clusters of people dotted throughout the spacious cleanliness of my working environment, past Paulette on the till who I notice has had a haircut and is looking at me with no expression whatsoever (What's she fucking looking at?) and in the direction of the doors. About a second before he gets there, my heart is pointlessly sinking. Half a second before he gets there, I notice his baby has the hugest arse I've seen this side of Jennifer Lopez, who I hate, and then, as he swoops through the door, indefinable top flapping behind him, the alarm goes off, and a professional sounding voice in my head says, "Oh, of course."

Paulette's gaze switches to: Expression!

Heads in shop swerve to: Exit!

Boy with baby begins to: Scarper!

Focus of me moves from him to: Job!

"Excuse me, young man!" I say weirdly, as I'm only twenty-three myself, and my heart leaps as I have an excuse to chase him. I can hear some camp comic from the past, who I hate,

lisping "Chase me!" And I start to giggle.

I trample toes as I run to exit; suddenly I am Peter Parker, who I love, bursting out of his clothes into his Spiderman outfit, my pointless wandering amongst the aisles is given a boy's own fantasy heroism, my gym muscles have a meaning beyond being aesthetically teasing on Old Compton Street. With one small incident of shoplifting, I've gone from Git in Uniform to Guy With a Mission. I feel exhilarated, nervous, and slightly like a prick, as I reach out towards the boy's shoulder, yelling: "Stop, thief!"

I do realize the twattishness of such a sentence, but the traditional drama of it appeals to me. I feel a bit like whenever I say something stupid to get the

attention of someone I fancy, as though that's what's going on at the moment: I don't want him to go yet.

The street's full of shoppers, which slows him down; he's being careful not to collide with them, his hands protectively covering baby's head. He's so thoughtful. I think I'm falling in love.

I open my mouth again to tell him to stop, but, "Please don't go!" comes out instead, the oddness of which startles him into stopping. He turns around, and looks at me like I'm really weird. I feel as though I've been chasing him for a very long time. I'm breathless. I'm forgetting what the excuse for the chase was.

"What do you want?" he asks, like he might add: "Because I'm in a rush." He talks like he might not be from round here.

"There's no need to be rude!" I say.

He frowns. Apologises.

"I mean, do you have something from the shop?" I am aware that I say it a bit poof-like. Christ. Usually I sound commanding in these situations, now I'm talking like I did when He Who is Never Named was leaving me and I tried really hard not to react in the slightest.

I read lots of books about magic, science fiction and shit. Something I used to dream of doing was "putting a glamma on," like magical beings do, so I could pass unnoticed through crowds, shoplift, or bedazzle a chosen observer with an illusion of beauty worn upon my skin.

I am flexing my biceps so much it hurts.

I am feeling like this boy and his daughter have a glamma on. They are gazing up at me moodless, then suddenly their faces look like Puss in Boots in *Shrek 2* when he does that how-could-you-harm-me, how-could-you-resist-me face. They giggle. I feel a bit under the weather.

After an eternity of staring, he takes an age to empty out each pocket, doing it carefully because he's still clutching his daughter with one hand, also because he wants to piss me off.

"There," he sulks. "Nothing!"

In his palm are some keys, a packet of fags, sweets, nothing exotic. I step close and lightly pat the pocketed parts of his person with warm, open palms, no warning or asking of permission. It's unprofessional.

He looks me in the eye, deep enough for me to see that his are actually an old grey. I bite my lip. His breath doesn't smell at all, but the warm breeze of it makes my eyes wet. He touches daughter's hair with fingertips. She clutches his leg like to a tree in a storm. He says, slowly, softly, through teeth: "Well? Find anything?"

I remember the reason why I touched him, the

bullshit premise on which I gave chase.

"Er, no. Nothing."

"Then can we go?" He snaps. I think: "Don't do that. I hate it when you do that."

I look at the Beyoncé, who I hate, arse on that little girl, and snap back: "That is one hell of a full nappy"

He gives me a long, green-eyed cat look, mutters something, picks up his baby, puts her in my hands, and says: "Nice man is going to hold you while I sort out your nappy, darling."

I'm a bit taken aback. I smile into her delighted-at-the-world face, hold her up and away from me. I notice that what I thought were fluffy bunnies on her coat, are definitely something else. Then, slowly and deliberately, with a pissed-off look like he thinks I'm forcing him into child abuse, he starts to rummage around in the back of her nappy, making a right show of it. I glance around to see what the public make of it, as, like Widow Twankie pulling out endless colourful bloomers, he produces book after book from that Tardis of a nappy. A few of the general public are watching: old ladies, homeless blokes, young girl with dodgy cardigan and funny tattoo.

Baby girl says to me: "Me not need pot-pot no more!"

"Obviously not," I say, eyeballing her dad in fascinated irritation, as he pulls out one last book, very dry, with a showy flourish. It's a Godawful sixties gay pulp fiction thing called *He Walked On the Other Side* with two men looking OTT at each other as they cross the street, a big gun pointing upwards out of the title.

An old lady claps in thrilled applause.

"What a naughty daddy he is," I say, putting some kind of meaning in my voice which makes him blush. My heart hammers like it's alive with the possibility of I know not what.

"Books are expensive," he says. "I'm a single parent."

Steely blue eyes. Rips baby back. Pouts. I fight the urge to bite that pout, to kiss it. I'm good at biting and fighting. If ever I wear a glamma, it is that of a hard nut. If you're handy in a scrap, you can wear your poofery like an invisible cloak, unseen by blind minds as a result of the violence hinted at by the jut of your jaw and the lost glint of your shark eyes. You can be the fucking business. (And yet here it crumbles before his soft baby blues)

"Did you say her name is...?" I ask the boy and then I say her name, and I forget her name all at the same time. He sneers hatefully at me, and then smiles so sweetly that I flinch, confused.

"Yes," he whispers, eyes shut, blissful expression floating on face. I think it is bliss, or love, or something along those emotional lines. He says it in a

voice I heard once in a dream, and it makes me dizzy. Crowds of oblivious shoppers sink even further back from my awareness. I feel I'm swooning, my head tilts back, eyes close, and I'm getting this bizarre feeling coming up from the base of my belly. I can feel something moving there which I felt the first time I took drugs, when that cute bloke at that party handed me something and I thought: "I'll take anything from you."

There's something extra pulsing in my belly, and vaguely, I think: "I don't know what's going on. I think I'm having some sort of break down again. I feel sad every single day for at least one minute." When I open my eyes, beaming, not sure if I'm elated or upset, there it is, in front of me, nothingness, the empty space where boy was, and where baby girl was. All full of nothing. Just backs of shoppers walking by, occasional faces coming my way, plus little audience from general public who witnessed the freakery.

"You alright, love?" someone asks. Without moving, I look through shop window. Paulette and other staff are looking at me like watching coffin going into ground. Nice.

"Yes, thanks." Irrational tears welling.

Ancient lady in duffel coat despite summer heat moves forwards, points in front of me with wooden stick; wafts spicy sweet smell.

"He dropped something."

There's a small black book with bits of crap sticking out of it. I grab it, peek inside: photos of the boy-man, beaming, emerging head and shoulders from the sea, laughing, eyes as clear as the water, no body visible below the surface. I close the notepad, clutch it to heart, ignore what's around me, hear an old voice say: "You mind how you go, son."

Five minutes later, I am standing in an alley beside the bookshop on the High Street where I used to work, and I couldn't give a shit about fuck all, to be honest, I just want to see inside the little black book. There's drawings of the kid, photos of the dad, and in every single one of them he looks beyond the camera, as though to something which is so beautiful it can't be caught on film. There's lots of him in bloody trees, and there's a drawing like those annoying pictures in shop windows where you have to stare and stare until you can see dolphins, which I hate and can never see. It's all red and green like crushed strawberries with mushy peas. It's bollocks, but I find myself gasping when I first turn the page and see it, because I swear to god it's the weirdest, most hidden picture of a secret, and the little girl's name, that you could ever

imagine. And then I forget it. Irritating, I know, but sometimes life's like that.

Absolutely fuck all happens for about a year. I've got a new job, which I hate. I'm sitting in the park having my fag-break watching a woman who's either mad or just talking with a hands-free mobile. I worry a lot about emissions, but fear of appearing insane to the casual observer stops me going hands-free. Just as I'm thinking about how important it is to me that I appear sane, I see him again, walking slowly across the green, heading towards the area of the park where trees are left to grow. I only ever met him once, but his frame is tattoo beneath my skin. I have called out to people, who were obviously not him, seventeen times over the past year. And I do it again:

"Stop, thief!"

And again: "Stop, thief!"

Fuck knows why, it just comes out like that.

He does stop, turns round fast, goes: "Bloody fucking you?" Spits. Looks twisted and demented. Brown eyes nearly exploding out of head. Heart beating like it's only just learnt how to. I cannot believe it's him again, here for real. Him.

"Where's your daughter?" I ask, and straight away regret it, as weirdness goes up a notch. He starts to howl, recoil, clutch his chest, like how people from other places grieve on the news when bombs have gone off, and I think: "Shit, my chat up lines are not going down well lately."

My heartbeat spikes up and up in time to his voice.

"I'm sorry," I shout and reach out and try to touch him. Then suddenly I'm holding him and I'm whispering things that are silencing and soothing, and it appears to be working, as he shuts the fuck up. I think something else: "He might not be what he appears to be."

He says: "I lost her."

"Where did she go? Back to her Mum's?"

He laughs at me, crystals in his eyes. "No, it's not as simple as that. She was like a dream. I lost my book."

"I've got your book..." I start to say, and then he's screaming at me, he's jumping me; it's almost sexual. He's screeching: "Where is it, where is it!?" like bats out of cave, roaring like things that roar. Loud. Dead dramatic. Back slams into tree trunk, pain is major, cry out, fall down, big useless muscles of mine, he sweaty on top like dream come true dressed up as nightmare, his fist flying, open my mouth, scream something, anything, turns out it's her long unremembered name from the shite picture in the book, scream it out, at last remembered, a little girl not forgotten. Scream out her name. Over and over.

He stops, fist mid-air, frozen.

"Yes," he gasps. "That's it."

I nod, and bewilderingly after several years of dryness, I'm crying like a baby and I'm repeating her funny little name over and over: "Mel-i -a."

Again.

"Melia."

Again.

"Melia."

Something is happening. The boy is merging with the green of the grass behind him. That's insane. I think he's laughing, maybe crying, clapping his hands together, or just wringing them. Or having some kind of fit. He's absolutely definitely either happy or sad. I'm good at reading people.

I giggle at my own lonely and complete weirdness. I wonder at a world in which I've walked this long, unrumpled as a lunatic. Everything - the park, people, paranoid delusions - is spinning around me while I stand completely still and smile at the colours which spread nicely like jam. I stick out my tongue and take a lick.

Blinded by everything.

Through the roar of life's whirlwind cuts suddenly the young man's wild, exhilarated cry: more beauty in his reference to his daughter, or to his dream, or whatever she was, than in the sound of all the things I love to hear most of all in life.

"You found her," he says. "You found her."

There is a heartbeat of silence.

There is the boy's face, flooding tears, just in front of me, exploding pain and love outwards, which I realise with shock is at least partially directed at me. There is a feeling of something massive, like birth or death or learning.

And then there is another feeling: small, tiny fingers wrapping around mine, like ivy.

And then there is a feeling: of something clutching to me, like to a tree in a storm.

And then there is a feeling of some sort or other. And like a hopeful, waking, ever-loving fool, I walk right into it, eyes wide open, seeing magic. ■

Off the Road to Echuca

Robert Hamberger

Eucalyptus bark is peeled across the scrub,
shaved crisps of it threaded by bull-ants.

The dried stream-bed snakes a gutter
over terracotta dust.
You spit on it to give it water.

Your brother hooks a stick
through a sheep skull's eye-sockets
swinging it like a bone trophy.

We're not home inside this huge hush.
Pink-bellied galahs shrill overhead
while a ghostly ibis weights that far branch.

I want us to leave. I want you to explore.
Walk on ground I won't rub between my fingers.
Drink from springs I won't taste,
but come back safe.



41

Francesco Teo
Pensiero infinito,
Pensiero innocente

Reviews

Confiding, not Confessing, Saradha Soobrayan on Berta Freistadt's *Flood Warning*
Fried Chicken for the Soul, Christopher James on Steven G Fullwood's *Funny*
Ill-Temper and Isolation, Peter Burton on Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Separate Rooms*

Confiding, not Confessing
Saradha Soobrayan on Berta Freistadt's
Flood Warning

THE BEAUTY of any poetry pamphlet lies in its tantalising brevity. A good pamphlet will whet the reader's appetite for the full collection. Berta Freistadt's *Flood Warning* does just that. Some of these poems have appeared in magazines and journals and a handful of earlier versions were published in the anthology *Dancing the Tightrope* (Women's Press, 1987).

It is always heartening to witness a poet's work growing from a few poems to a larger crop, and the 23 poems in *Flood Warning* suggest that this is only a segment of a much longer journey.

The first part of the pamphlet charts the ebb and flow of relationships between women. These intimate poems are best read at night in a half-lit room. The second half consists of two long poems: "Israel in Kilburn" and "The Questions of Maps." These poems are starker and question the poet's identity across many borders: cultural, racial, and biblical. The text of the poetry marks out a new geography. "Israel in Kilburn" moves through the unstable sites of memory and the history of an ongoing conflict. The voice strives to make sense of a plural identity located in the present tense.

*My head is full of broken gravestones
graffiti in Bradford in Stamford Hill
of the subtleties of the Israeli accent
like my Mogen David for the most part
hidden. No words for this passing.*

The poem highlights the personal and political risks faced by any poet responding to war, and the limitations and failure of language.

*My head is full of nouns and verbs
die, sea, throw, be and adverbs
bitterly and strongly. Why
an adverb of interrogation
the bloody adjectives right and wrong
("Israel in Kilburn")*

By contrast the poems in the first part of the pamphlet are openings to dreamscapes, they have one foot in the air and the other in water. The imagery trickles under lines, creating a watery lyrical web. Female energies and sexuality are explored and dressed in many guises:

*I went to hear the great
one-breasted Goddess sing
but though fire*

*smoked around her ankles
she did not play for me
("The Event")*

Elsewhere the poems invite the reader to overhear the responses to a lover, the tone of voice is open, lyrical, almost conversational, as in the title poem.

*Don't ask me if I love you
love comes
like a wave
a wall of grey water
silent in the unspoken night
seeping through windows
cracks beneath the doors
("Flood Warning")*

The intimacy of the lyrical love poem is one of the reasons I tend to favour poetry over prose. The film techniques – close focus, the stretching of time – are some of the tricks employed by both, but the urgency to preserve the lover, the kiss, the hand, the breast, and immortalise key moments, are effectively achieved in the lyrical love poem in as little space as possible.

Many of Berta Freistadt's stanzas take up so little room, the narrow line lengths act as if they were guarding the still air around each poem. It is in the silences at the end of lines that we hear the residues of longing.

*your secret image
jerks and stutters
like TV static.
In the nights dead
I call to you.
("Everything is Hidden")*

While poems like "The Room" and "Everything is Hidden" are faithful to their three-stanza pattern, poems like "April" and "Monday" prefer to adopt a free-fall technique. The heavy line breaks and the absence of punctuation creates an irregular-breathing pattern while the syntax unwinds to create a staggered, uneasy effect.

In "Bad Girl 2" there are flashes of the everyday mingled with fragments of fairytale: "fingers in every witch's pie/playing softball all the time/girl." There are echoes of witching imagery, as well as devils and demons, elsewhere in the book. These darker elements add an essential strand to the poems, reflecting the complexities and simplicities of loving women.

When the feminine nocturnal is exposed in the two poems "Moon Watch" and "Dark of the Moon" the poetry really bites and is unafraid to explore. The endings land well. The juxtaposition of place

and the personification of the moon create an unexpected last look:

*Looming risible
under Hungerford Bridge
broom invisible
She sweeps all the
jewels of the river
onto her neck
("Dark of the Moon")*

It is Berta Freistadt's artful escapes into fantasy and myth, as in "Psyche In Love," that rescue the love poems from drowning in their own metaphors; at times, though, some come perilously close. The strongest poems are united by clean line breaks and a crisp diction. The first stanza of "Love Bird" shows a careful handling of both music and imagery:

*In my breast
an egg is hatching
shell is splintering
water breaking.*

The sincerity of the poet's eye and a delicate handling of emotions can be found in this final stanza:

*In my breast
yolk solidifies
albumen is translucent
with hope.*

The poems are committed to the intimacy between lovers and between the poet and reader. A dual sense of privacy and openness is maintained throughout; the "she" and "you" of the poems become universal, visually transformed. These poems are relaxed in their exploration of love between women, there are no names, no labels needed, lovers are affirmed through the act of poetry. Berta Freistadt skilfully confides rather than confesses. *Flood Warning* is a refreshing pamphlet for any reader, queer or not. ■

Five Leaves Publications, 2004, 35 pages, £4.50

Fried Chicken for the Soul Christopher James on Steven G Fullwood's *Funny*

I WAS never one for self-help books; in fact, I loathe them. I hate somebody trying to tell me what to think, when all they're doing is stating the obvious. I don't care that men are from Mars and women like Penis. And I know how to make a mil-

lion dollars: write a book telling people how to make a million dollars! I particular hate a self-help book that comes disguised as a book of reflections or a guru's autobiography.

So when I read the first essay in Steven G Fullwood's new book, *Funny*, I thought, "Here we go..." The opening line, "Don't expect any insightful revelations in this piece..." sent alarm bells ringing and injected a mental anaesthetic into my brain. However, if I can say two things were wrong with that opening sentence, it would be my expectations and the proclamation itself.

Let me get things straight: *Funny* is not a self-help manual. It is a book of self-reflective essays by a New-York-based African American writer and archivist, that left me feeling like I'd just finished a healthy portion of mumma's fried chicken. I was content and full.

Some of the topics include sexual denial, black religious homophobia and the insecurity of black gay sexual justification. Complicated? Hardly. Steven's style is conversational, allowing the words to trip off the page, creating instant images and access to some complex issues. Some of the essays are in narrative form, some dialogue, and some internal monologue; all are delivered with a tongue-in-cheek and very critical wit.

The strength of *Funny* lies in its lack of polarization. As a gay black man myself - as opposed to a black gay man (yes, there is a difference) - this book was like a breath of fresh air. It managed to interlink topics which are traditionally left unsaid. The author weights the importance of being a man, being gay, and being black with equal validity, providing what at first appears to be an alternative look at the world, but in the end turns out to be just the way everyone else sees it; a relief to realise that everyone else is just as fucked up as you are. Steven is not afraid to laugh at himself and invites us to laugh with him, while reminding us to save a few titters for our own lives.

This is not an issue-led book, but a series of essays from a man trying to explore himself and shine some light for the reader in the process. You don't have to be black and gay to enjoy the book. You don't even have to be a man; some of the essays will have the sisters up and singing praise that finally somebody understands.

Instead of pandering to any one group, the book explores aspects that affect everyone. "The Low Down on the Low Down" discusses being black and in the closet; "Muscle Crowd My Mind" talks about our current obsession with gym culture; "Why We Don't Cry" relates to the constant cry of women for a sensitive man; "Phone Call" berates the loneliness of rejection; and "An Open

Letter to Hetro Sister” challenges fag-haggism (is that a word?). Some of the topics, though, are thrown away too quickly.

Above all, the book is entertaining. It is what it says on the cover: funny. You won’t be holding your belly and rolling in the aisles but I defy you to stop yourself smirking as you recognize situations from your own misspent life.

Funny isn’t psychology degree material. It doesn’t provide a studied insight into the African American homosexual, and so may be found lacking by those who want more academic substance to their reading.

What *Funny* does do is it exists.

We are always looking for representations of ourselves in the media, some to the extent where it becomes an obsession; a point duly noted in Steven’s essay “I Don’t Care.” What *Funny* does best is to say it’s alright to be you, and yes .. there are other people out there just the same. It provides representation without an agenda, and, without beating you about the head with the truncheon of Political Correctness, it allows the message to soak in. If you’re looking for something to make you think and laugh at the same time, *Funny* is the book to take to the beach with you (yes, by the time your order arrives from the States, summer will be that much closer). ■

order *Funny* from www.stevenfullwood.org

Vintage Entity Press, 2004, 126 pages, around £7.00

Ill-Temper and Isolation

Peter Burton on Pier Vittorio Tondelli’s *Separate Rooms*

PIER VITTORIO Tondelli’s final novel *Separate Rooms* is an intensely reflective and (presumably) highly autobiographical book which is non-sequential and almost without incident.

Originally published in Tondelli’s native Italy in 1989 and in this English translation (by Simon Pleasance) in 1992, *Separate Rooms* followed his controversial *Other Libertines*, prosecuted and very nearly banned for obscenity on first publication in 1980. *Guard Duty*, published in 1985, is an autobiographical piece built around the homoerotic possibilities of compulsory military service and *Rimini*, also published in 1985, is described by Edmund White in this new edition of *Separate Rooms* as a “Gone With the Wind-style bestseller.”

Leo, the protagonist of *Separate Rooms*, is, like

Tondelli, a writer and lecturer from the province of Emilia Romagna: he grew up in “a small town in the lower Po valley.” He is at once a cosmopolitan who, during the course of the novel, trails none-too-happily between cities in Italy and Germany, as well as Barcelona, London and Paris, and a provincial who can be achingly nostalgic for his childhood home town:

The fabric of the town is still intact, gathered about the old city walls now in ruins. Leo was born here in a large, old house looking out on to the main square. It is still there, but not for much longer. It has been abandoned. The tenants have gone, and with the exception of the barber all the store-keepers on the ground floor have abandoned their shops. Demolition work will start before long, and the town will be given another building with neither history nor style.

However, to appropriate the title from Thomas Wolfe’s 1940 novel, “you can’t go home again,” and perhaps the most poignant section of this novel is when Leo returns to his “small town in the lower Po valley” and drifts disconsolately around, a ghost without a meaning, nodding to people he barely knew, barely remembers, discovering, of course, that nothing is as it was, nothing is as he remembers it; passing years and accruing experience have diminished a remembered past.

Tondelli died from an AIDS-related illness in 1991, aged just 36. Leo, in this novel, is grieving for Thomas, already dead from an AIDS-related illness. We aren’t told if Leo himself is terminally ill. It seems likely, and in many respects *Separate Rooms* must be read as a meditation on life and experience and not simply as “a discreet, lyrical meditation on the nature of male love” (White in his Introduction).

In the very best sense of the word, *Separate Rooms* is an intellectual novel in which Tondelli (in the guise of the ill-tempered and isolated Leo) wanders through the separate rooms of his life, fingers trailing along dusty memories, trying to make sense of a life spent on an odyssey unfulfilled but a life certainly not wasted. Like Lampedusa’s sublime *The Leopard*, to my mind the greatest Italian novel of the twentieth century, *Separate Rooms* is a book to return to time and again, to ponder and savour sentence by sentence. It is also a stark reminder of the havoc AIDS wrought on our gay culture. ■

Serpent’s Tail, 2004, 224 pages, £7.99

Chroma: Biographies

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Alison Aiken has translated works ranging from Court Life in Medieval Portugal to Teireira Gomes's Erotic Stories. She also compiled and translated Letters from England, a selection of articles written by Eça de Queirós while he was Portuguese consul to England in the late 1800s (published by Carcanet).

Christopher Barnes www.bbc.co.uk/tyne/gay/2004/05section28.shtml

Chris Beckett lives in London with his Japanese partner who is a painter. He works in the international sugar trade and writes poetry in his free time. He won the Poetry London competition in 2001 and his first collection, *The Dog Who Thinks He's a Fish*, was published in September 2004 by Smith Doorstop.

Peter Burton's books include *Rod Stewart: A Life on the Town*, *Parallel Lives*, *Talking to...* and *Amongst the Aliens*. He has twice been nominated for a Lambda, and has edited six collection of short stories, most recently *Bend Sinister*, *Death Comes Easy*, and *Serendipity: The Gay Times Book of New Stories*.

Mauro Cocilio is a photographer based in London. His portraits and his documentary and fashion images have appeared in *Dazed*, *The Independent Magazine*, *Marmalade* and *SHOWstudio.com*.

Steve Cook was born and lives in London. He is working on a novel and short stories. His stories have been published in *Uncut Diamonds* (Maiapress 2003), *The Bridport Prize Anthology 2003* and shortlisted for the Real Writers Short Story Competition 2002 and 2004.

Beverley Duguid is completing a PhD in Gender History and working on her poetry and short stories. She has taught Women's Studies and Black Women's Literature at Birkbeck College and Roehampton Institute. She lives in West London.

Simon Edge is a former editor of the newspaper Capital Gay and a long-standing gay activist. He has had stories published in the collections *Death Comes Easy* and *Serendipity*. He has written widely on gay issues in the national press, and is currently a senior feature writer on a national newspaper.

Robert Hamberger's poetry has been broadcast on Radio 4, and published in numerous magazines, including *The Observer*, *New Statesman*, *Poetry Review* and *Gay Times*. He has been awarded a Hawthornden Fellowship, and a sequence in his latest collection was shortlisted for a Forward Prize. He has published five pamphlets (including *The Rule of Earth* from Smith/Doorstop 2001) and two collections: *Warpaint Angel* (Blackwater Press, 1997) and *The Smug Bridegroom* (Five Leaves, 2002).

C.A.R. Hills is the former editor of PEN News and has contributed to the Oxford DNB. His "Clapham Omnibus" column was published in *Prospect*, and his short stories appear in *Quadrant* (Sydney). He reviews for the *Literary Review*, the *New Statesman* and *The Tablet*. He was one of the leading contributors to *The Reader's Companion to 20th-Century Writers* (4th Estate/OUP).

Christopher James has written for *The Sunday Times*, *The Voice*, and *Thud*. His story "One, One Thousand" appears in the first issue of Chroma. He had an unexpected career in choreography, but has returned to his first love, writing.

Mary Lowe is the co-ordinator of proudWORDS, the UK's only queer writing festival (proudwords.org). She is currently Writer-in-Residence for Age Concern, Newcastle. She writes mainly fiction and is currently completing her novel.

Bertie Marshall is a writer/filmmaker. His debut novel, *Psychoboy*, was awarded a New Writers Bursary by South East Arts. His short fiction has been published in *Prague Literary Review*, *3ammagazine.com*, *Spikemagazine.com*, and his short films, "Peephole" and "Frowzty," have been shown in the UK and USA. His next book, *Berlin/Bromley*, is set in London in 1976-77.

Lisa Matthews is a poet currently writing a novel. Her first pamphlet of poetry, "Postcard From A Waterless Lake", was published by Diamond Twig Press in 2002. She lives on the North East coast and is co-founder and organiser of the UK's only creative writing festival - proudWORDS - run by and for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.

Michele Martinoli was born in Switzerland and has been living in London since 1969. Working mainly for the gay press, she has had extensive work published in *Blue Magazine*, *Gay Times*, *Diva*, *AXM*, *QX*,

Time Out, and *Attitude*. Her forte is the male nude. In March 2005, her work was exposed in Leicester Square for The Dept of Health's Hepatitis C Awareness Campaign. See more at michelemartinoli.com

Gerson Nason is a USA-born writer/playwright/journalist living in London. A workshop production of his play *14 Emotions* debuts at The Drill Hall later this spring.

Christopher Nield works as a copywriter. His work has been broadcast on Radio 4 and featured in *The Guardian*. His poem "The Difference You Make" was Highly Commended in the Creating Reality Poetry Competition 2004. He has recently completed his first collection of poems, *Phatic Communion*, and is writing a children's book. Contact: christophernield@hotmail.com

Daniel Noquet grew up in London, but now lives in Brighton, where he works as a support worker for people with learning disabilities. He is training to be a yoga teacher, and can be contacted at dannoquet@yahoo.co.uk.

Eduardo Pitta was born in Maputo (Lourenço Marques) in 1949 and lived in Mozambique until 1975. A large selection of his poetry was collected in *Poesia Escolhida*, 2004, and his critical writings have been collected in three books. His *Fractura*, 2003, is an essay on homosexuality in contemporary Portuguese literature. With his trilogy of short-stories *Persona*, 2000, his writing underwent a tectonic movement. See more at eduardopitta.com.

Ernesto Sarezale (aka Eugenio Alberdi) is a Basque writer and performance poet based in London. He's a member of the Gay London Writers and founder of Homophone, a series of queer poetry readings that happened in London in 2002. He also works with multimedia and concrete/web-based poetry.

Eamon Somers Sporadic contributions to: *In-Dublin*, *Identity*, *Treblin Times*, *Out*, *Gay Community News*. Published stories in: *Out*, *Tees Valley Writer*, *Quare Fellas*, *ABC Tales*. Rehearsed readings (Chelsea Centre): *A Quarter of Broken Biscuits*, *Baby I Love You*. Novels (bottom drawer): *Almost Awakening*, *Foolish Dream*. Novel in progress: *Foot is Dead*. Publisher wanted.

Saradha Soobrayen is a poet and short story writer based in London. She received an Eric Gregory award for poetry in 2004. Her short story "Three Flavours On A Plate" was published in *KIN: New Fiction by Black and Asian Women* (Serpent's Tail, 2003).

Francesco Teo, 19, lives and studies photography in northern Italy. He is currently working on a project for an Italian national newspaper called the Memory of Photography, the Photography of our Memories.

Andrew Warburton is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing and working on a fantasy novel for children. His short story, "The Russian Soldier," recently appeared online in *Velvet Mafia*. He can be contacted at andrewwarburton@hotmail.com.

River Wolton's poems have been published in the UK and USA. Her play *Egg and Spoon* (about the lesbian baby-boom) was commissioned for the Cultural Festival of the Sydney Gay Games 2002. Her poem "Everything I Know About War" won the Red Pepper Poetry Competition 2004. She lives in Sheffield, where she teaches creative and reflective writing in schools and community projects.

Ajamu X is a lens-based media artist and community activist. He has shown work in galleries and alternative spaces around the world. He is co-founder of rukus! Federation, a company set up to celebrate and showcase the best in challenging work across all mediums by Black LGBT artists nationally and internationally.

Tamar Yoseloff's first collection, *Sweetheart* (Slow Dancer, 1998) was a Poetry Book Society Special Commendation and the winner of the Aldeburgh Festival Prize. Her second collection, *Barnard's Star*, is recently published by Enitharmon Press. She is the Programme Co-ordinator and a tutor for The Poetry School and also teaches creative writing at Birkbeck, University of London.



Mauro Cocilio
Mum, Portu Frailis Forever

**Alison Aiken
Christopher Barnes
Chris Beckett
Peter Burton
Mauro Cocilio
Steve Cook
Beverley Duguid
Simon Edge
Robert Hamberger
C.A.R. Hills
Christopher James
Mary Lowe
Bertie Marshall
Michele Martinoli
Lisa Matthews
Gerson Nason
Christopher Nield
Dan Noquet
Eduardo Pitta
Ernesto Sarazale
Eamon Somers
Saradha Soobrayen
Francesco Teo
Andrew Warburton
River Wolton
Ajamu X
Tamar Yosseloff**

*He left something behind the morning after.
I found it almost by chance. It was hidden
in the plies of soiled linen. It dropped
from the sheets as I shook them, as though
the hole from a cigarette burn had gone loose
and was aired with the hairs and the smells.
But we did not smoke the night before.
Wrinkly, stretchy, bold, ridiculous,
much bigger than I remembered it,
what now lay on the floor...*

(from Ernesto Sarezale's *The Aftermath*)